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NORTH CAROLINA

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# Keeping History Alive, Via Veggies

Seed saving at Old Salem ensures that heirlooms thrive.

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talks of dead okra look out of place among the rows of cabbage, salsify, and kale growing behind the Single Brothers' House in Old Salem. The dried seedpods, which threaten to crack open and scatter seeds in the wind, aren't a sign that the gardeners are slacking on seasonal maintenance. Just the opposite, in fact.

"We often have people ask why we're letting the plants 'go to waste,'" explains Martha Hartley, the director of research and outreach with the division of restoration at Old Salem. "We let the plants go to seed so we can preserve their history."

Seed saving is integral to the mission of Old Salem. The vegetables, herbs, and flowers growing in six gardens spread across the 90-acre historic site are the same varieties the Moravians cultivated prior to 1850.

Accessing seeds from that time period required significant effort. The horticulture staff scoured specialty seed catalogs and requested seeds through national seed-sharing programs like the Seed Savers Exchange. After acquiring period-appropriate heirloom varieties, seed saving efforts ensure stock is available for future plantings.

A makeshift lab on the second floor of a former Coca-Cola bottling plant across the street from the village is ground zero for seed saving. A bread rack pillaged from a defunct bakery is piled high with drying plants like dill and cotton, their seedpods waiting to be harvested. Around the room, hundreds of old vitamin bottles and peanut butter jars have been washed and filled with saved seeds. The methods may be low-tech, but the passion of the staff has made the seed saving efforts a success.

Old Salem launched a Seeds With Stories campaign in 2013, encouraging local residents to share the seeds their families have been saving for generations along with the stories of their origins. "It came out of a desire to find out what was growing when the Moravians lived here," says staff gardener Eric Jackson.

The project has yielded some incredible finds, including cucumber seeds from the Shutt family, who owned land in the community in the 1770s. Dubbed "Uncle Jim Shutt's Cucumber Seeds," the heirloom seeds were planted in the garden in 2014.

For local gardeners who want to plant heirloom varieties at home, the village sells seeds, bulbs, and plants at The Garden Shop at T. Bagge Merchant and hosts a popular annual seed swap to share their bounty of saved seeds. "People recognize that these seeds are special," Jackson says. "They get excited about being able to take part of Old Salem back to their own gardens."

## **The Garden Shop at T. Bagge Merchant**

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