

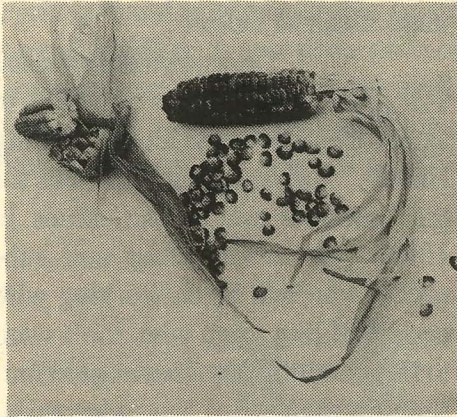
HERITAGE CORN GERMINATES IDEA FOR NEW JOURNAL

I was pleased with the response I received from my announcement last summer of the sale of a Catskill Mountain heritage corn seed. The local press gave me good coverage and through the sale of 50 seed packages a small fund was created to use for the eventual repair and preservation of a local Dutch barn. This excellent response and many kind letters helped germinate the idea for this quarterly publication.

Last spring I rototilled a new 30' x 40' garden plot to grow the heritage corn grown in the Hudson Valley of New York State. I put up an electric fence to keep out deer and racoons. It was my intention to use the corn to raise awareness of local heritage and especially the importance of saving the last few Dutch barns in the region.

Corn was a way to bridge the gap between the present and past that makes history come alive. The old corn knife in an antique shop no longer has a meaning or life, yet understanding its history makes it part of us again just as growing and eating the corn preserves a heritage in us.

The happiest people I know are those who are connected to the past. They are comfortable with the present and excited about the future.



Wolven Old-Fashioned Blue and White Sweet Corn. Heritage seeds of the Hudson Valley. Photo by P.S.

History for them is alive. I discovered this years ago when I began talking to my neighbors about their lives and former communities.

I began growing local heritage seeds (vine pea and sweet corn) in 1987 which had been grown by many generations of the Wolven family in the Highwoods area of Saugerties, New York. When I first asked Francis Wolven about the origin of the seeds he gave me, he said, "I don't know. We all took it for granted and handed it down over the generations. The Carles had it and the France family and the Van Akens family—the Dutch side of my family. It was good practical corn that was always there, just like the weather."

For two years I grew a small patch of the corn in my garden, but the first results were flawed by incomplete pollination, the need for richer soil, and winds that blew down the corn stalks. Each year I learned more about growing corn and about the history and traditions of corn. My

neighbor Christine Martin planted some heritage beans she obtained from a commercial supplier. We compared notes. She continues to plant her beans and experiment with others.

Francis is the last of his people to grow the blue and white corn in Highwoods. What was once common as the weather is now almost forgotten—all but for the 50 people from New York State to South Carolina and beyond who bought the seeds. They remind us that seeds of many open-pollinating varieties of vegetables once shared and treasured were abandoned in Francis' generation. Times changed; farming declined; and the old ways were forgotten. "What is well known is seldom taught," Frances told me.

In adopting hybrid corn seed, home gardeners and farmers lost their historic place as nature's assistant in maintaining and improving a variety through selecting seeds for the next year's planting. They lost touch with their heritage and especially the traditions of the corn harvest which had deep and mixed cultural roots and were practiced on farms in the East and Midwest.

Today there are over 200 living historical farms that recreate farming practices of the past. Funded by museums and local communities, they preserve heritage plants and early farming practices and tools. The Association for Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums was created back in 1970 to support this very important work.

Continued on Page Three

From the Editor

By Peter Sinclair

This quarterly publication will provide insights and information about ourselves and our relationship to our past. It will focus on the study and preservation of America's material culture, the architecture, tools and objects of our rural past and the heritage of regional traditions. The study of material culture is an important tool in our understanding of how people lived in the past. It also strengthens the awareness of a community's heritage and the need for preservation by exploring the early artifacts and methods of subsistence and pleasure for what may be useful again.

The idea for this journal was suggested by the response I received last year from the sale of a heritage sweet corn seed, a variety known as "blue and white." The sale of the Wolven family seed has helped preserve this local variety of corn by distributing its seed to many gardens. The inspiration for "Living History" came also from the work I've been doing for years on behalf of the Dutch Barn Preservation Society, a group of dedicated people who joined together in 1986 to study and preserve examples of New World Dutch Barns in the Northeast, primarily New York and New Jersey, where this distinct framing tradition continued for over 200 years. I came to realize that there are many people interested in understanding the remnants of the past they encounter in their daily lives and that there is still a great deal to discover by sharing information.

The membership in the Dutch Barn Preservation Society has been effective in a relatively short

time. Concern for this unique, endangered and almost forgotten tradition of barn architecture has brought a new awareness of the importance of these structures as well as a sense of urgency about documenting and preserving all aspects of our traditional material culture.

This introductory issue will give you a glimpse of what's in store for you in future issues. "Living History" will be expanded in size for the summer and winter issues in 1991. As an advertiser and subscriber you will be networking with people of like mind who don't want to limit our historical heritage to museums and libraries, but rather make it an integral part of daily life. On these pages you'll be meeting people with valuable information, memories and contacts.

"Living History" will publish reviews of books, interviews with people who have important stories to tell as well as those who are doing research and preservation work. If you want to grow heritage seeds, you'll know where to find them. If you have a barn to repair or an old house to honor and treasure, we'll give you tips on what to do. If you've never taken the time to sit down with

a relative or neighbor or friend to listen to their past with an eye to understanding them better, "Living History" will guide you along the way to an exciting adventure.

We will make available books of value and items and information about preservation services. But our most important resource is you. We want to hear about your interests, experiences, opinions, in addition to unique and amusing information. A man in upstate New York has offered to write a piece on the history of Dutch beds and the methods of sleeping of these early settlers. I was surprised by some of his insights. I told him to include photographs and drawings; to type out the article double-space on a standard typing paper; and anticipate that our subscribers will read every word.

Expect some new experiences and friends as a result of reading "Living History." I'm looking forward to meeting and hearing from you.

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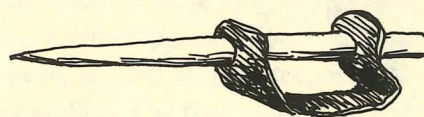
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The idea of selling and exchanging heritage seeds is now popular. Some commercial seed suppliers offer them and more varieties will certainly be discovered through this widespread interest. The organization "CORNS" which is advertised in this issue is dedicated to preserving the genetic diversity of open pollinating corn varieties. In its 30 years of existence, over 4,000 people from small gardeners to large farmers have participated in its work of maintaining and exchanging varieties. "CORNS" has several hundred varieties and access to hundreds more.

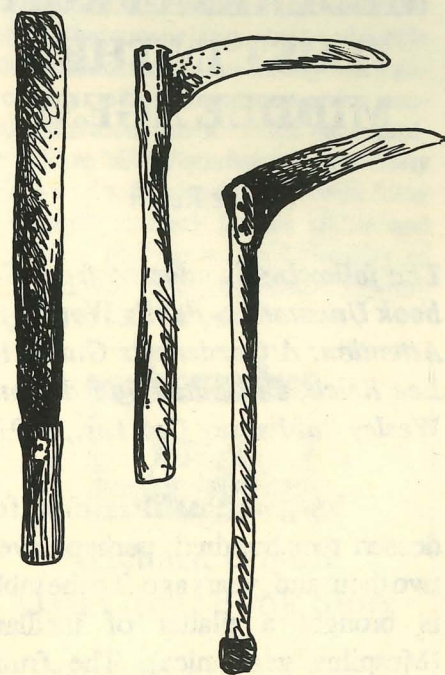
Along with the preservation of heritage seeds there is a growing awareness of the importance of studying and preserving the architectural traditions of farming. Whether they are derived from German, English or Dutch models,

America's historic timber frame barns are a unique architecture and an important expression of regional culture.

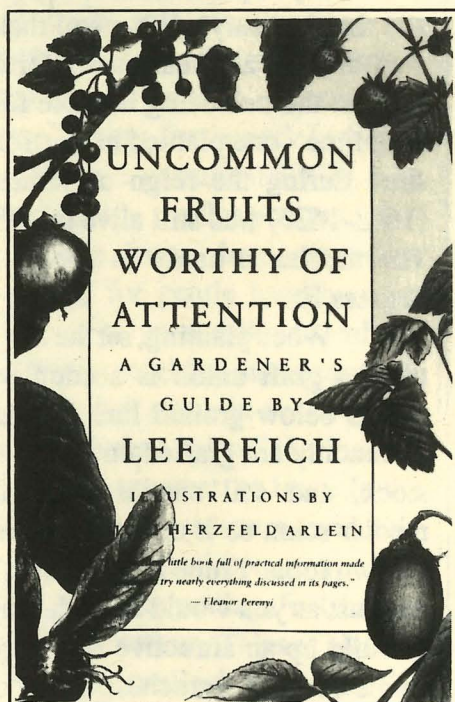
Today there is a renewed interest in timber frame construction, not only as an aesthetic use of wood but as a practical and environmentally sound way of building. A new generation of timber framers take pride in the tradition of this ancient craft and bring a new sensitivity to the use of wood.



Corn husking pin, wood and leather, 4" long. The husking pin, like the Wolvin sweet corn, originated with the Iroquois.



Corn knives, wood and iron. (Left to right). 1. Southern style, Ozark Mountains, MO. Belonged to grandfather of Herb Lytle. 2. Northern Style, 16" long handle. Catskill Mountains, N.Y. Robert Wolven family, West Hurley. 3. Northern style, Esopus Valley, N.Y. DeWitt/Milliken farm. Town of Ulster.



By Lee Reich
Illustrations by
Vicki Herzfeld Arlein
\$18.95, hardcover
ISBN: 0-201-52381-7

Uncommon Fruits Worthy of Attention is a practical gardening guide as well as a book for reading and savoring. It will help garden enthusiasts -- from novice to expert -- successfully cultivate and enjoy such fruits as cold-hardy kiwis; pawpaws; alpine and musk strawberries; and cherries from "Olde England". All of the fruits Lee Reich celebrates are edible right off the tree, resistant to pests, and temperate-zone hardy. A source list of plants is included.



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MEDLAR: A FRUIT LOST IN THE MIDDLE AGES?

by Lee Reich

*The following is adapted from the book **Uncommon Fruits Worthy of Attention: A Gardener's Guide**, by Lee Reich, Published by Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Inc., 1991.*

* * *

Imagine that it is time for dessert two hundred, perhaps even two thousand, years ago. To the table is brought a platter of medlars (*Mespilus germanica*). The fruits resemble small, russeted apples, tinged dull yellow or red and with their calyx ends (opposite the stems) flared open. Open a fruit. The flesh inside is as soft as a baked apple. The flavor has a refreshing briskness with winy overtones, like old-fashioned applesauce laced with cinammon. Embedded in the pulp are five, large seeds.

Medlar reached its peak of popularity during the Middle Ages. In the ninth century, Charlemagne's *Capitulare de villis* (Decree concerning towns) listed medlar among the plants mandatory for the royal estates. Medlar trees were familiar denizens of walled monastery gardens of the Middle Ages, and a tree, appropriately, is growing in the recreated monastery garden of the Cloisters, the medieval branch of the New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Medlar was a market fruit in Europe as late as the end of the nineteenth century.

Today, the medlar is rarely cultivated in Europe or anywhere else. The fruit admittedly could be, and has, been described in less than laudatory tones. "A crabby-looking,



VICKI HERZFELD-ARLEN

brownish-green, truncated, little spheroid of unsympathetic appearance," wrote one author. "Open-arse" and its variations "openars" and "open-ers" were English names for the fruit a thousand years ago, and allude to the large open disc between the persistent calyx lobes. Shakespeare's Mercutio was more delicate with his choice of words, calling the fruit "open et cetera" in *Romeo and Juliet*. The French bestow upon the medlar the unflattering nickname *cul de chien*. The fruit's downfall is not its flavor, but its appearance.

Nonetheless, the tree itself is quite ornamental, and well worth growing today even for its beauty alone. Medlar grows as a flat-topped, small tree, usually no more than twenty feet high. The elbowed contortions of the branches, so evident in winter, lend an air of rusticity to the plant. In summer, these branches are hidden beneath lush green, lance-shaped leaves which turn rich, yet subdued, shades of yellows, oranges, and russet in autumn.

A medlar in bloom, decorated

with large (one to two inches across) white or slightly pink blossoms, is every bit as showy as a wild rose. Some European cities, among them Lochem and Goor in Holland, have medlar flowers in their city emblems. In contrast to most other fruit trees, medlar flowers are born singly on the ends of current season's shoots. A whorl of dark-green leaves behind each flower contrasts and frames the blossom.

Fruit production is reliable - almost every flower will set a fruit. The blooms open late enough so that spring frost is rarely a hazard and the flowers do not need cross-pollination. Some pollination occurs in the absence of insects because as the flowers open the outward facing stigmas readily touch the inward facing stamens. The medlar even has a strong tendency to set fruit parthenocarpically, i.e. without any pollination whatsoever.

If you plant medlar, choose a site that is sunny, with a soil that is well-drained and reasonably fertile. Plan on the tree being in place for a long time - one planted in Hertfordshire during the reign of James I (1603-1625) was still alive in 1988. The medlar is hardy to about -20 degrees F.

When planting, set the tree so that its graft union is a couple of inches below ground line. Medlars commonly are grafted on pear rootstock, and soil should cover the medlar scion so it eventually forms its own roots. Prune a young medlar tree just as you would any other tree to build up an attractive and sturdy framework of branches. Later on, what little pruning is needed is confined to the removal of dead and crossing branches, and the thinning out of spindly wood to admit light and air into the tree canopy. Be careful not to prune off the extremities of

too many branches, for this is where most of the flowering shoots arise.

Besides beauty and good taste, another virtue of the medlar is that it is a plant which will usually bear fruit without the need for any spraying. Medlar shares some pest problems common to its kin in the Rose family, but these pests rarely become serious enough to warrant concern or mention.

*Medlar bears fruit
without the need for spraying*

Medlars are rock-hard and puckery when ready for harvest, and must be allowed to soften, or "blet," before becoming edible.

Though are picked rock-hard, the fruits must thoroughly mature on the tree. Fruit picked too early shrivels in storage and never attains good flavor. Harvest when the tree's leaves are just beginning to fall, at which stage fruits part readily from the branches. Leaving fruits on a tree late in the season adds to the medlar's show of beauty, for the nude branches become quite ornamental with their scores of little medlar pompoms.

The fruits' hardness belies their need for gentle handling. Set each fruit calyx end down and not touching its neighbor on a clean shelf or on a bed of straw in a cool room. Some gardeners "plant" the fruits in clean sand, sawdust, or bran. In the Middle Ages, gardeners evidently were not overly fastidious as to where they bletted their medlars, for Chaucer wrote in *Canterbury Tales* of bletting medlars "in mullock or in stre [in rubbish or in straw]". Casual gardeners then or now might let ripe fruits just drop from the trees and blet on the ground.

Bletting requires from two

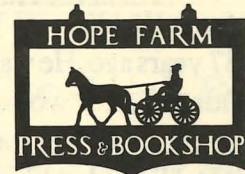
weeks to a month, at which time the hard, cream-colored interior turns brown and mushy. Do not touch the fruits except to remove them for eating; they will show you they are fit to eat when their skins darken. Once bletted, medlars keep for several weeks.

The easiest way to eat a medlar is to suck the fruit empty, leaving skin and seeds behind. The fresh fruit is (was?) the classic accompaniment to port at the end of a meal. The pulp can be scooped out and folded into cream as a dessert dish. Medlars also have been cooked in a number of ways, such as baked whole, stewed with butter, or roasted over a fire. The fruit is well-suited to the usual array of jams, jellies, tarts and syrups. You can make a refreshing drink by pouring boiling water over the fruit, then drinking the cooled liquid.

For all the centuries that medlars have been cultivated, remarkably few clones have been selected for superior fruit. 'Dutch' is a variety at least 200 years old and notable for very large fruits (for a medlar) produced on a plant flat-headed almost to the point of weeping. 'Breda Giant' and 'Large Russian' also produce large fruits. 'Royal' fruits have good flavor and are about an inch across. 'Stoneless,' generally acknowledged to be of poor flavor, has the saving graces of being seedless and a good keeper. 'Nottingham,' possibly the oldest medlar cultivar still cultivated, has small fruit but the best flavor.

And yes, medlar plants still are available today, from: Hidden Springs Nursery, Rt. 14, Box 159, Cookeville, TN 38501; Raintree Nursery, 391 Butts Rd., Morton, WA 98356; and Southmeadow Fruit Gardens, Lakeside, MI 49116.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Lee Reich knows the taste of medlar because he is a gardner, and people in the Northeast know Lee through his regular columns in local newspapers giving practical and seasonal advice to the home gardner. With an MS in Soils from the University of Wisconsin, Lee worked for years doing horticultural research for the USDA and received a PhD from the University of Maryland. He lives in New Paltz, N.Y. where he grows medlar and gooseberries.



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EEL STEW: A CONVERSATION WITH HANK VEDDER

Recorded August 1990 in Saugerties, N.Y. by Greg Huber, Karin Parton, and Peter Sinclair

Hank Vedder was born in Palenville 87 years ago. He was raised by his grandmother, a woman who lived to age 96. She still spoke the Dutch dialect. "Sounded like a lot of geese squalking to me," Hank recalled.

When he was a boy, Hank's grandfather had a pair of oxen which he used to haul bluestone from the quarries. When Hank was nine, his grandfather sold the oxen and bought a team of western horses. "There's the scar of one of 'em," Hank said pointing to his face. "She broke my jaw. Didn't make no difference. I broke her so I could ride on her back, just the same."

Hank learned early all about horses. One day he saw a horse he liked and asked the owner how much he wanted for it. "If you kill the other one," the owner said, "you can have this one for fifteen dollars." Hank

gave him the money.

Horse hides were worth from ten to twenty dollars in those days. "So I skinned the horse," Hank said, "and took the other one home." The horse proved to be full of incurable bad habits and finally, to no one's displeasure, drowned itself in the duck pond.

Hank recalls that local people always had their own seeds. There were three or four varieties of corn. A sweet corn, a white dent, and a popcorn. Corn was planted in hills three feet across. Twenty-five hills of corn stalks cut and tied together made a "stout" (shock) for which a worker was paid two cents.

Hank has never gone far from the streams and hills of this high borderland between Ulster and Greene County, New York. A steep rocky wooded mountainside rises from a deep ravine across the road from Hank's house. It dominates the skyline to the west. Hank knows its trails and can point out its many features such as Wolven Cove and the entrance to Tory Swamp where he once hunted the snowshoe rabbit with his dog "Juicy." The mountain is known to Hank as "The Catskills."

It was high on this Catskill mountainside that Hank once set a



Hank Vedder, shown with his eel fishing gear, a rod-and-reel and a gunny sack. Photo: Peter Sinclair.

bear trap when he was a boy. He tied a rope from the trap to a flag in a tall pine tree to signal when the cage was sprung. He caught a bear cub and it became his friend for two years. It slept right in the same room with him. One day the bear gave Hank a hug that broke his ribs and after that the bear would not come near him so he gave it away.

Hank's body is old and scarred by the many accidents that have shaped it. Parts of the fingers on his

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left hand were lost to a farm machine and Hank likes to show you the trick shoe on his right leg which he can twist 90 degrees sideways. It rotates on the stump of his former foot which he lost to a logging accident. It has carried him up many hillsides and down many streambanks where the eel and fish swim. Hank loves to fish.

Hank has worked at a number of trades. He once logged black ash for an Iroquois Indian who made splint baskets. He had to carry the small logs from the forest because he couldn't drag them. The Indian then pounded strips of splint off the logs for his baskets.

"See these," Hank said, pointing to his sunken gums and missing teeth. "I lost these to Henry Ford once while changing a tire. You remember, before they had the removeable rims."

In addition to the oil painting illustrated here, which documents a Stony Hollow mill (a picture which Hank drew from memory and his sister painted) Hank constructs 7 by 10 inch framed landscapes using seeds and glue to delineate buildings, rivers and roads. Two of them hang on the walls of the small uncluttered kitchen of the house where Hank has lived most of his life. They are ideal-



Mill in Stony Hollow, Hurley, N.Y. Drawing by Hank Vedder painted by his sister. Elders in Stony Hollow who were shown in the photograph liked the painting but couldn't identify the mill depicted.

ized landscapes that express the orderly and optimistic outlook of the artist.

The next issue of "Living History" will continue Hank's story detailing his methods of catching, keeping and cooking eel.

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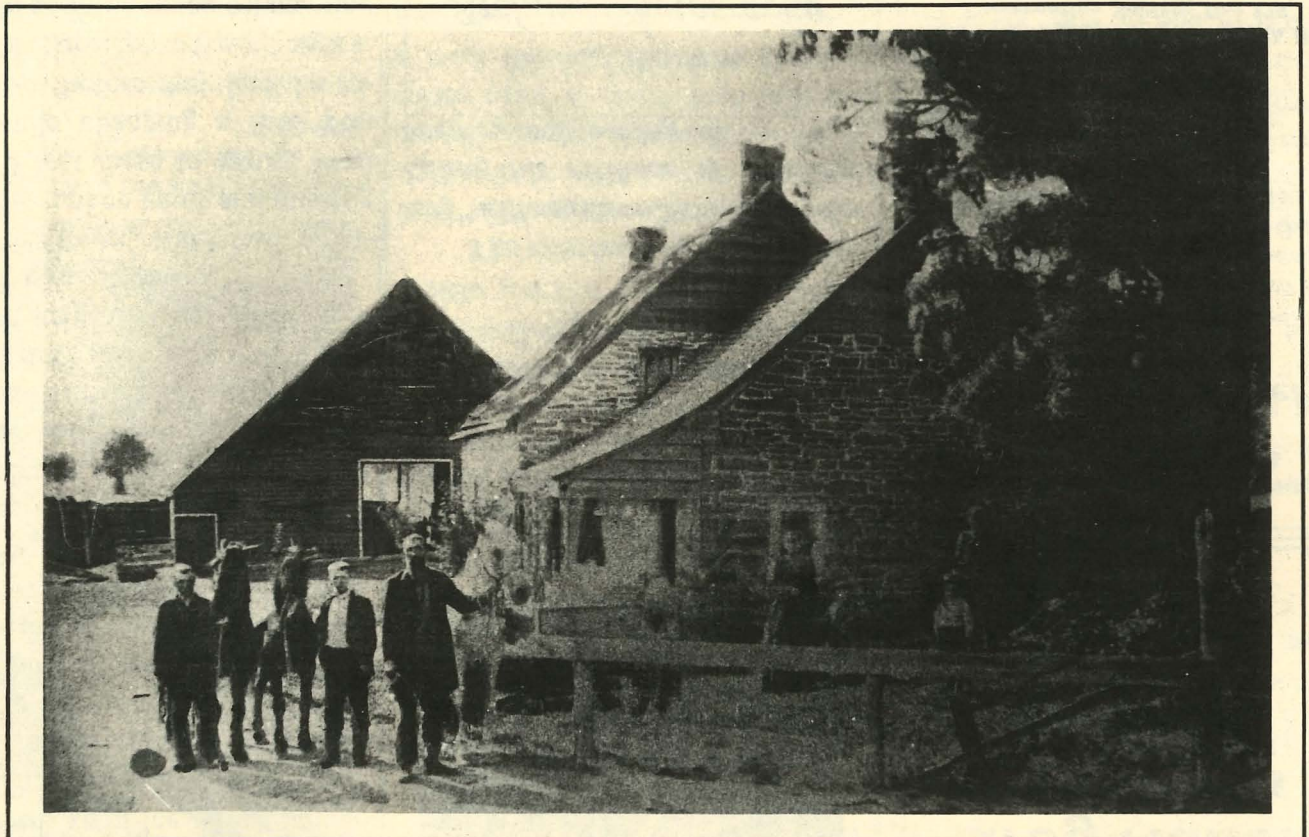
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Roosa/Winchel Farm, about 1800. Marbletown, Ulster County, N.Y. Photograph courtesy of Letha Gedney.

THE NEXT ISSUE OF LIVING HISTORY will include articles about heirloom gardening, the New World Dutch barn, the origins and status of the living historical farm in America today, and **MORE**. We welcome your input!