

# American Vegetable Seed Industry— A History

The first commercial seedsman in the United States generally is believed to have been David Landreth, who started his business in Philadelphia in 1784. Previous to this time, all garden seed was imported from Europe and sold by general merchants or individuals with an interest in horticulture. An advertisement that appeared in the *Boston Gazette* in February of 1719 might be cited as an example: "Fresh garden seeds of all sorts, lately imported from London to be sold by Evan Davies, gardener, at his house over against the powder house in Boston". Nathaniel Bird, a book seller in Newport, R.I., sold garden seed at his shop in 1763.

The Shaker communities in western Massachusetts and eastern New York entered the vegetable seed business in about 1790, and the community at New Lebanon, N.Y., became especially well-known for high quality seed. At first, the Shakers sold purchased seed as well as seed they produced, but, because purchased seed was often of inferior quality, several Shaker communities agreed in 1819 henceforth to sell only their own seed. This agreement stated in part, "We will not hereafter put up or sell any seeds to the world which are not raised among believers." The Shakers were an ingenious people, with many inventions to their credit, including the paper seed packet or envelope. The seed packet made it possible for seedsmen to merchandise seed in individual retail units, rather than bulk in cloth bags or other containers.

Several methods were used to sell garden seeds in the 19th Century. The wooden seed box that was filled with rows of paper envelopes was a common sales container. These boxes served equally well as shipping containers and as store counter display racks. Itinerant peddlers sold seed door to door in rural areas, and mail order catalogs became increasingly popular after their introduction around 1825 or 1830. In most cities, there were seed stores or agricultural warehouses where farmers and gardeners could purchase a wide variety of agricultural supplies and implements in addition to seeds.

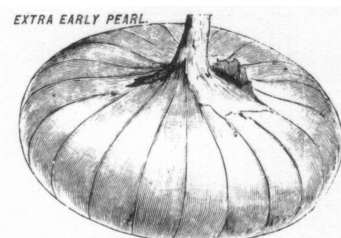
Seed catalogs deserve special consideration. At first, catalogs were very plain, but after 1870, increasing attention was given to cover design, and engraved cuts were added to illustrate particular cultivars. Colored catalog covers appeared around 1875 to 1880, and shortly afterwards, color also was utilized on one or 2 inside pages. Brilliantly colored catalog covers depicting beautiful flowers and attractive vegetables were used by almost every seed company that engaged in the mail order business during the 1890's.

This latter period and the early years of the 20th Century could be called the golden age of seed catalog art. For rural Americans living isolated lives in the days before the telephone, radio, and television the annual arrival of seed catalogs with their tempting illustrations of the newest cultivars was awaited eagerly each year.

The writers and illustrators of late 19th Century seed catalogs were not always concerned with truth in advertising, and exaggerated claims were not uncommon. The Maule catalog of 1880 shows several men harvesting onions, each the size of a bowling ball. The catalogs often featured "new" or novelty items, which is probably a reflection of the fierce competition that existed in the industry.

Before 1800, most individuals saved much of their own seed, and trading seed with relatives and friends was a common practice.

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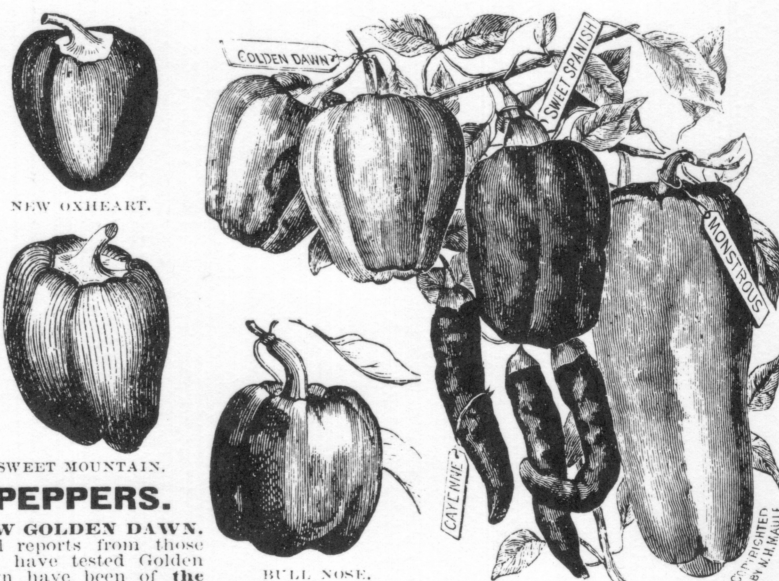


**EXTRA EARLY PEARL.**—This is among the earliest, if not the earliest of White Onions. Keeps well; of a fine showy, waxy appearance; the flesh is snow white; flavor mild and pleasant; often grows 5 to 6 inches in diameter first year from seed. Pkt., 10 cts.; oz., 40 cts.; 1 lb., \$1.00.

Fig. 1. An exaggerated advertisement in *Maule's Catalogue* showed an onion with a 5-6 inch diameter.



Fig. 2. An exaggerated advertisement appearing in *Maule's 1887 Annual Catalogue* shows a curd of cauliflower filling a wooden chair.



## PEPPERS.

**NEW GOLDEN DAWN.**—All reports from those who have tested Golden Dawn have been of the most favorable character. In shape it resembles the Bull Nose, except that it is a little more pointed on the end; in color, it is a beautiful golden yellow, which, as all will recognize, is a very distinctive feature. It is very sweet, not the slightest suspicion of a fiery flavor about it, and withal very productive. Pkt., 10 cts.; oz., 40 cts.; 1 lb., \$1.10.

**SWEET SPANISH.**—The earliest; very mild and pleasant. Pkt., 10 cts.; oz., 30 cts.; 1 lb., \$1.00.

**LARGE BELL, OR BULL NOSE.**—It is early; bright red in color; very mild. Pkt., 10 cts.; oz., 30 cts.; 1 lb., \$1.00.

**SWEET MOUNTAIN.**—Larger and of milder flavor than above. Productive and

very desirable. Pkt., 10 cts.; oz., 35 cts.; 1 lb., \$1.10.

**LONG RED CAYENNE.**—True. Pkt., 10 cts.; oz., 30 cts.; 1 lb., \$1.00.

**SPANISH MONSTROUS.**—The largest Pepper of all, except Ruby King. Frequently grows six inches long and two inches thick. Pkt., 10 cts.; oz., 40 cts.; 1 lb., \$1.10.

**NEW OXHEART PEPPER.**—This is a hot pepper that all my customers who will try it, I am certain, will like. It is one of the very best for pickles, being of medium size and heart-shaped. It will please you. Pkt., 10 cts.; oz., 30 cts.; 1 lb., \$1.00.

**NEW RUBY KING.**—The largest and best of all. See cut on 3d cover page; also for 1887 Specialties. Pkt., 15 cts.; oz., 50 cts.

Fig. 3. Of the peppers described in *Maule's 1887 Annual Catalogue*, several are still on the market today.

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*Continued from inside cover*

Thomas Jefferson's garden book relates how important this practice was for gardeners of that time. As inexpensive, commercially-produced seed became available, the custom waned. Much of the vegetable seed sold during the early years of the 19th Century was imported from Europe, and although its importance declined, imported seed was a factor throughout the century.

One of the early centers of commercial seed production in America was the lower Connecticut River Valley, which was recognized for high quality onion seed as early as 1750. The towns of Wethersfield and Southport gave names to onion cultivars grown even to this day. Almost all domestically produced seed was grown in the eastern part of the country until after 1875, when the industry began to shift westward to dry climates conducive to the production of high quality, disease-free seed.

To assure quality and varietal purity, market gardeners frequently raised a major share of their seed requirements. They commonly developed improved strains adapted for local conditions. For example, the cabbage cultivar Early Jersey Wakefield, considered to be the best early cabbage for the area around New York City, was selected from the English cultivar Early Wakefield by the Newark, N. J. market gardener, Francis Brill. Surplus seed produced by market gardeners often was sold to commercial seedsmen, and because they developed expertise as seed growers, some market gardeners became seedsmen themselves. Peter Henderson of Jersey City, N. J., and W.W. Rawson of Arlington, Mass., were 2 such individuals.

When new cultivars or selections were developed, seedsmen sometimes attached a prefix that identified the line with the company. Henderson's 'Bush Lima', Burpee's 'Golden Self-blanching celery', Ferry's 'Extra Early Tom Thumb pea' are examples. The name of a company seed farm, such as Fordhook (Burpee), Bloomsdale (Landreth), or Moreton (Harris) was sometimes attached as an alternative means of identification. Individuals who developed a distinctive cultivar occasionally attached their names ('Skillman's Melon' or 'Darling's Early Sweet Corn'), and sometimes the town of origin was used as a prefix (Irondequoit or Hackensack melons).

Both large and small seed companies existed during the last part of the 19th Century. The large seedhouses employed plant breeders, operated extensive trial grounds, and marketed seed over a large sales territory. At the other end of the scale was the seedsman who hired only one or 2 workers and who marketed his seed in a relatively restricted geographical area. One seedsman fitting the latter description was Irving Folsom of Raymond, N.H. Apparently, Folsom carried on

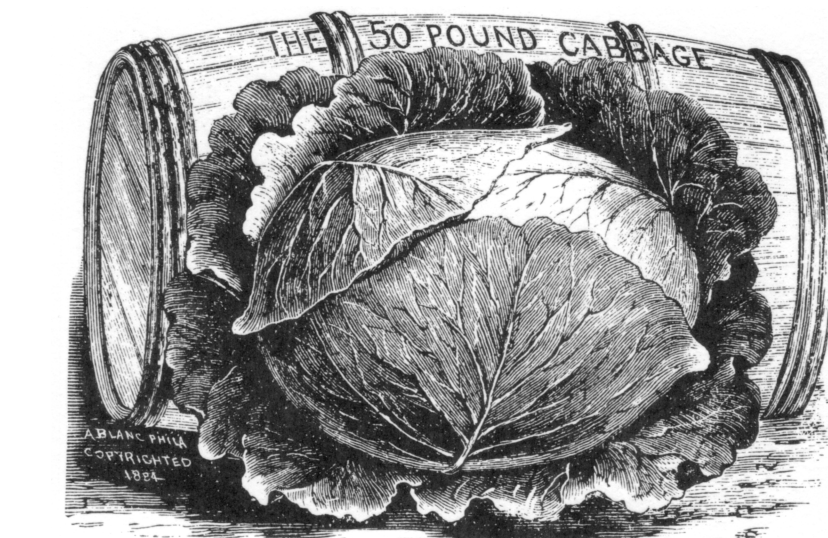
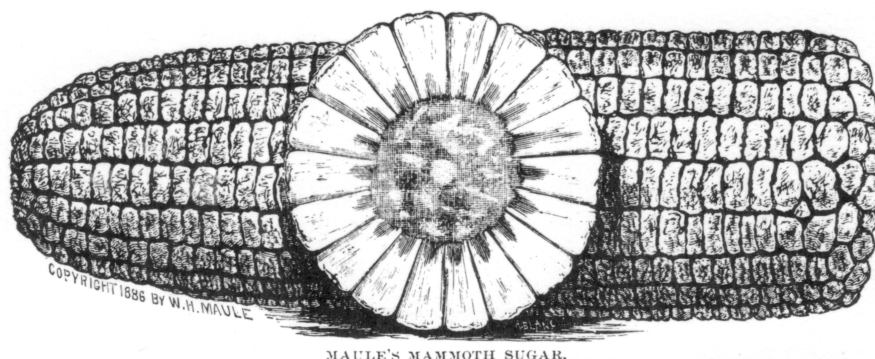


Fig. 4. Advertised in *Maule's 1887 Annual Catalogue* as "the largest cabbage in cultivation," yet with "delicate and fine flavor."



**MAULE'S MAMMOTH SUGAR.**—Not only the largest eared, but also one of the very sweetest corns known. Ripens a little after the Evergreen, and for canning purposes is particularly profitable. Ears frequently weigh 3 pounds and over. Your garden will be incomplete without it. Pkt., 15 cts.; pint, 30 cts. **NEW CROP.**—A week to 10 days earlier than any other. See page 1. Packets 15 cents.

**A SINGLE EAR WORTH  
\$25.00**  
Oct. 1st, 1887. How large can MAULE'S MAMMOTH SUGAR be grown? Whoever sends me the largest ear the coming summer will be entitled to \$25.

Fig. 5. *Maule's Catalogue* also advertised a 3-pound ear of corn, 'Maule's Mammoth Sugar.'

a general farming operation in addition to being a seedsman, for he indicated in his 1883 journal that he raised chickens and sheep, sold peaches and strawberries, and kept a cow. A few entries from his journal may be of interest:

January 29: Printing seed papers (packets). It is a cloudy warm day.

February 23: Filling beet and parsnip papers. About 6 inches of snow fell last night.

March 19: Filled 97 seed boxes. A lamb was born this eve.

May 18: Setting Danvers carrots, onions, and beets. Cow had a heifer calf.

July 18: Threshed flat turnip seed. Haying.

August 8: Cut spinach seed. Very dry weather.

September 1: Cut part of the onion and carrot seed. Threshing beet seed."

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