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## Home & Garden: Gone to seed

*Baker Creek is banking on success in Petaluma*

by [Annie Spiegelman, the dirt diva](#)

If you want to call yourself a true gardener, you better head on over to the seedy goldmine we have just up the road in Petaluma. Baker Creek Heirloom Seed opened its "Seed Bank" doors in 2008 at the corner of Petaluma Boulevard and Washington Street in the magnificent historic building that once housed the Sonoma County National Bank. The company has two other stores and farms; one in Mansfield, Missouri, and the other in the historic Comstock, Ferre & Co. in the town of Wethersfield, Connecticut. Founder and owner Jere Gettle, known to many as the "Indiana Jones of seeds," planted his first garden at age 3. By 17, he had printed the first Baker Creek Heirloom Seed catalog. That was 13 years ago. Today the catalog ships to 250,000 gardeners nationally and offers the largest selection of heirloom varieties in the U.S.A.

What's even more distinctive about this company is that it generously donates seeds to many of the world's poorest countries as well as locally to school gardens, prisons, community gardens and orphanages. On top of that, all of the seeds are non-hybrid, non-GMO, non-treated and non-patented. Baker Creek does not buy seed from Monsanto or any other gene-altering, Frankenfood-hugging companies. "We feel that food and life are rights that should not be controlled, manipulated and polluted by a few multinational corporations," says Gettle. "Genetic engineering is even starting to scare the farmers who grow it. Scientists are finding these manipulated genes showing up in ground animals and insects. Sadly, we humans are the ultimate 'guinea pigs' of the chemical corporations who engineer many crops so farmers can spray nearly unlimited amounts of the same corporation's herbicides. More and more studies are showing links to human health risks and the older varieties of seeds are disappearing due to cross pollination."

Wander through this 1920s-era corner bank building, with its 30-foot-high ceilings, full of jaunty seed packs alongside hundreds of locally produced home and garden items and you will feel as if you've gone back in time. (Or, straight to heaven, if you're a card-carrying flower junkie.) You'll see selections of seeds from the 19th century including many Asian and European varieties like Tete Noire cabbage, Flat of Egypt beets, Painted Lady runner beans and Aunt Ruby's German cherry tomatoes. You'll find Fig-Leafed Hollyhock, a variety that is not bothered by rust, as well as the heart-throbbing cottage garden must-have Persian Red Love-in-a-Mist. OK, one more temptation before you jump in your car and drive north like a love-crazed hortiholic: the smoky, misty pinkish-orange shades of Mother of Pearl poppies. Drivers, start your engines!

Gettle comes from a family of farmers and has concerns for farmers nationally. He believes we all should be thinking about who really owns our gardens, our seed supply and our food. "There's the issue of farmers not having the rights to what is on his or her farm. One of the big threats is from seed corporations, a patent holder, who believes if their seeds are passed by wind onto your land, the company now owns your crops," says Gettle. "Monsanto and a few other corporations have a goal to own as much of our food supply as possible through seed." There are now hundreds of lawsuits or attempted lawsuits affecting small farmers. Farmers nationally, both conventional and organic, are already losing their seed strains and possibly their livelihoods to a few giant agrochemical corporations. "Farmers shouldn't have to pay because they get contaminated. It shouldn't be that hard for farmers to farm."

Wondering what flowers to grow if you're a new gardener? "Most flowers love the climate here. I'd choose nasturtiums for both new and skilled gardeners. They taste like watercress," says Gettle. "Both flower and leaves are edible. Great in salads. It grows almost like a weed in coastal climates. Also sunflowers." As for vegetables, "Melons, tomatoes, peppers all love the heat here," says Gettle. "I recommend the smaller varieties of tomatoes and the Russian varieties are faster." Some recommendations: Gypsy, Black Prince, Purple Russian. Gettle's favorite early tomato variety for everywhere, not just the Bay Area, is Violet Jasper. It's a purplish red tomato with light green stripes, and is the size of a salad tomato. "Gorgeous and really productive." He recommends the smaller tomatoes like cherry or currant, which are more resistant to disease if you have fungal issues in your soil. Also, "stake your tomatoes if you're concerned about disease. Don't crowd them. Make sure there's lots of breathing space, and plant them near a sunny wall."

Gettle and his wife, Emilee, recently signed with Hyperion Publishing to write their first book tentatively titled ==I Heirloom

Life==, which will be out in October. "The book is for new gardeners who want to learn all there is to basic vegetable gardening in particular; seed saving, growing, recipes, canning, preserving, tips on what to avoid," says Gettle. "It will also be informative for gardeners who have been gardening for a while but never got into seed saving or canning. It will be a quick guide, not an encyclopedia." I asked if the book will include the eye-catching farm photographs he has included in the seed catalog over the years and he humbly says, "Yes, but only the really good ones."

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