THE SAFE SEED PLEDGE
Lee Royer, Frederick County Master Gardener

How do you know the seeds and plants you put in your garden and yard are not genetically bioengineered with genes spliced from pesticides or other plants? The short answer is you can't. Changes are on a molecular level, unverifiable without special training and equipment, if then.

Many of us will recall from high school biology the 19th century Austrian monk, Gregor Johann Mendel, "the father of genetics", crossing different varieties of garden peas and recording the results of his work in a methodical scientific manner eventually explaining the inheritance of characteristics resulting from the combination of parent genes. He did this by hand, laboriously transferring pollen from pea X to pea Y, thereby "creating" pea XY carrying traits of each parent plant. Today's science is way beyond that. The crossing is no longer hand pollination but sophisticated gene splicing between plants and even animals and insects.

Regulatory agencies governing the issue are basically three: the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the United States Department of Agriculture. While some regulations do apply to GE, with few exceptions, these agencies consider GE plants and plant products to be substantially equivalent to non-genetically bioengineered plants, those developed just as Mendel did a century ago.

Until the government requires labeling, you may avoid GE in your garden by saving seeds from plants you know to be pure and purchasing new seeds & plants of heritage, heirloom or hybrid varieties from companies who are also concerned about GE. Listed below are three popular seed companies who have taken the Safe Seed Pledge sponsored by The Council for Responsible Genetics, www.gene-watch.org. Over 100 member companies have signed the pledge to "not knowingly buy or sell genetically engineered seeds or plants."

Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds
2278 Baker Creed Rd.
Mansfield, MO 65704
Phone 417-924-8917
Web site www.rareseeds.com

Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Co. sells only Open-Pollinated, Pure, Natural, and Non- GMO seeds. Owner Jere Gettle also publishes "The Heirloom Gardener Magazine" and each year sponsors two large public events celebrating heirloom varieties.

John Scheepers
Kitchen Garden Seeds
23 Tulip Drive
PO Box 638
Bantam, CT 06750-0638
John Scheepers is better known for selling bulbs, hence their Tulip Drive address, but they also print this small beautifully illustrated 47 page seed catalog of old time kitchen garden favorites. Barbara Damrosch, garden author and Washington Post garden columnist, is their special consultant so tips and garden advice are more interesting than in your average catalog. On the back cover are assortments of collections which offer groups of seed packets at a reduced price.

Johnny's Selected Seeds
955 Benton Ave.
Winslow, ME 04901-2601
Phone 877-564-6697
Web site www.johnnyseeds.com

Johnny's is almost universally popular with Master Gardeners and certified organic growers. Johnny's offers over 100 varieties of certified organically grown seed, clearly marked in the catalog. The non-seed hardware gardening products and other items they offer are ones that true gardeners will use, none of the cutesy stuff.

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit www.frederick.umd.edu/mg or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596. Find us on Facebook at http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland

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