

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

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## Turning Seeds Into a Way of Life

*Pam Buddy-D'Ambrosio*



With unusual, colorful veggies and fruits, such as the scallop squash and the yellow pear tomato, to capture then 3-year-old Jere Gettle's attention, he knew at this young age that a life of gardening was for him. His parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles served as predecessor gardeners and showed him the way.

As a youngster in 1983, Jere planted his garden in the family's small patch, while his parents tended their plants, flowers and fruit trees. As Jere grew, so did his interest in collecting and ordering seeds, which evolved into a seed company that started in his bedroom in 1998.

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*pictured: Jere Gettle, his wife Emilee and their daughter Sasha run Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds in Missouri, which offers hard-to-find or endangered seeds to customers surrounding the Missouri/Arkansas*

*border.*

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Jere and his family have been at the present Baker Creek property in Missouri since he was 12. The property is divided into 160 acres for his parents and 17 acres for Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, which Jere runs with his wife Emilee. They live at the location with their daughter Sasha and a menagerie of fish, cats, dogs, a turkey, geese, sheep, pigeons and more.

Jere says, "Sasha loves gardening and taking care of the pets." However, she doesn't do all of the caretaking on her own, as there are staff members to look after the animals.

The name of the business comes from the creek in the area near the Missouri/Arkansas border. The terrain is hilly and has frost as early as the end of September or early October. At times, the ground warms up in March and other times it can stay frost-covered until May, putting it in the 5B to 6B zone.

"We try to extend the season and grow the hardy and early plants nine months of the year outside," says Jere. "We do grow a little in the greenhouse." They grow on 3 to 4 acres, both trial and seed, and have farmers

elsewhere grow small and endangered crops for Baker Seeds.

“Our farmers grow plants like Ali Baba watermelon and Iraqi vegetables that have disappeared because of the war. Someone sent us seeds from Syria,” says Jere. “Either war, old varieties or lack of interest could be a reason a seed goes endangered or if a plant is not profitable, like white watermelon.” Farmers send seeds to Jere if they’re in danger of losing varieties. “We try to send seeds back to war zones,” says Jere.

On a more positive side, people get reconnected to their pasts through seeds. “The Millionaire tomato was a local tomato. There were canneries in the Ozark area that dried up in the ‘30s, ‘40s and ‘50s. As they died, so did the varieties of tomato. The Millionaire tomato was saved by a man in the county,” says Jere. The seeds found their way to Jere via a connection in Canada. “People in their late seventies and eighties come in to reconnect to a variety. Some are in tears when they find it here,” he says.

“A gentleman was looking for a 300- to 400-year-old Japanese squash variety, shishigatani, for 40 years. He found it in my catalog.”

“Others find seeds that have been passed down or the name of their family’s seed company in our catalog. They’re excited to see that something their father or grandfather developed is being grown again,” says Jere.

The quantity of the seeds of each variety varies. “A small sample took two years to grow before entry in the catalog. One eggplant took seven years to make it in the catalog, not because it took that long to grow, but other circumstances prevented the inclusion in the catalog,” says Jere. The Jersey Devil tomato took 20 years to have enough seeds to offer. The packets are 75% to 80% packed by machine and the rest packed by hand.

The per packet seed count varies, too. Rare seeds are 10 to 12 per packet; tomato, pepper and eggplant have 50 seeds per packet; and lettuce exceeds that number. “We’re able to send people in the U.S. free catalogs and we receive an order from every one out of four catalogs sent,” says Jere. They receive seed orders from 25 countries. Through the seed description, they encourage customers to be certain that the seeds can grow in their areas. “The vast majority of the seeds will do well in the continental U.S.,” says Jere. “Very few people order from very cold areas. We cover all growing zones.”

When the Gettle family wanted to spend the winters in California, they tossed around the idea of working with gardeners. Their 10,000 sq. ft. Petaluma location has a 6,000 sq. ft. retail area, which is being expanded by 2,000 sq. ft. and serves as a base for trials, education and seed distribution.

In 2010, the landmark Comstock, Ferre & Co. location in Wethersfield, Connecticut, became available. Jere and Emilee purchased the New England seed company and are restoring buildings and equipment. “We’re creating a non-profit educational farm with 1.75 acres of living history, seed-saving, cooking and canning education,” says Jere.

The Baker Creek Seeds’ customer demo is a majority of women, 18 to 50 years old. “Overall, the new gardeners are in their fifties and sixties, retired or college-age, in their twenties or just starting a family. There are many young families with one to three kids just getting in to gardening,” Jere says. “Most people haven’t gardened and want to connect to the earth, to connect to food and know what’s in it. Many people have discovered how much fun it is to be outside, to get exercise, see bright flowers, and for instance, tell stories of

what their Japanese forefathers ate or the Thai veggies they want to grow.”

People want to try different foods. “They can tell the difference between a store-bought tomato and an heirloom,” he adds. “If it has flavor, there is a story to tell and it clicks that a farmer still produces in their area.”

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