

# D. Landreth Seed Co.

*the fall and rise of  
an American classic*



The remarkable story of a company that grew to influence the world, and the vision and dedication of a woman who refuses to let this national treasure vanish.

BY PAMELA BAXTER



IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR a true heirloom, you don't have to look any further than the D. Landreth Seed Company, and not just because the company specializes in heirloom vegetables and flowers. Rather, at the ripe old age of 222, the company itself deserves the label.

Founded in 1784, the D. Landreth Seed Company soon became known throughout America and around the world as the grower and purveyor of the finest seeds available anywhere. The company not only sold seeds to founding fathers George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, it also has the distinction of having sold seeds and plants to every president from Washington to Theodore Roosevelt.

President James Monroe purchased linden, spruce, hemlock, and magnolia trees from the company in 1820 to be planted in Philadelphia's Independence and Washington Squares. Many estates, including Washington's Mount Vernon and Jefferson's Monticello, planted their grounds with Landreth trees; some of these fine old trees are still standing.

By 1830, when British India placed its first seed order, Landreth was truly a global company. One of Landreth's early catalogs noted that, "Shipments of [the company's] seeds are as regularly made for planting on the shores of the Ganges and the Bay of Bengal, as to those of the Mississippi and Ohio." To supply the increasing demand, the company established additional seed farms in New Jersey, Vir-

Left: The colorful cover of Landreth's spring 1902 catalog. Top: New owner Barbara Melera displays antique seed packets and equipment from the company's past.





Landreth was a seedhouse giant throughout the 19th century. Far left: A 1896 catalog claims Landreth as “Seedsmen to the American People.” Left: David Landreth II. Above: Women operate seed-bagging machines at Landreth in the late 1890s. Below left: Workers store radishes collected in horse-drawn wagons in a barn at the Landreth farm, circa 1890s.

ginia, and Wisconsin for a total of 1,600 acres.

The oldest seed house and the fifth-oldest company in America, the firm remained in the Landreth family until 1942. By the mid-1900s, however, Landreth had lost its original stature and had virtually disappeared.

Fortunately, as gardeners know, good stock does not die quickly. There was life left in Landreth’s roots just waiting for proper care. Under the guidance and inspiration of new owner Barbara Melera, who purchased what was left of the business in 2003, the company has been rescued from six decades of neglect and is making a steady, if quiet, comeback. As the company has re-surfaced, so has much of its 222-year legacy.

## A SEED IS PLANTED

In 1780, 29-year-old David Landreth left his home in England for Montreal, Canada, where he intended to establish a nursery business. Finding the Canadian climate too cold for his trade, he relocated to Philadelphia in 1781, a time when “the rearing of garden seed” was a pursuit unknown as a profession in America. In this new country, with its land yet to be



explored and cultivated, the young immigrant’s seeds and nursery stock were immediately in demand.

Landreth’s claim to fame was not based solely on his impeccable integrity and devotion to selling “seeds that grow.” He was passionately interested in plants and pursued new varieties tirelessly. Children everywhere can thank Landreth for introducing spinach to America; a later variety, Landreth’s “Bloomsdale,” remains a standard.

There were many other “firsts,” including Freestone peaches, distributed by Landreth in 1790, and the zinnia, introduced from Mexico in 1798. In 1800, David Landreth established the first trial grounds in America for testing purity of seed stocks. And in 1811, the company in-

*“In nothing is the force of habit more evident than in the selection of garden seeds; old kinds, long since exploded and rejected by experienced cultivators, are in request by those but partially informed, and new varieties of value are refused, simply because they are unknown. We have endeavored to discriminate with discretion—have retained good kinds, however old they may be, and admitted nothing new on the scale of novelty alone.”*

—From the 1862 “Descriptive Catalogue of the Garden seeds cultivated at Bloomsdale, The Seed ground of David Landreth & Son, Near Philadelphia”



troduced the first really white potato to the United States.

## THE COMPANY TAKES ROOT

Aside from the seed business itself, the company put down deep roots. In 1828, David Landreth and his son, David Landreth II, were among the founders of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and both served as officers of the organization. In 1832, the elder Landreth published the first floral and horticultural magazine in Pennsylvania.

In 1847, David Landreth II purchased Bloomsdale Farm in Bristol, Pennsylvania, which became the company's new headquarters. He began the publication of an annual *Almanac*, packed with information on how to grow his seeds and cultivate crops for best results. His letters to readers are scrupulously detailed and display an intense commitment to his trade and respect for his customers.

## EXPLORATION AND INNOVATION CREATE FURTHER GROWTH

For years, Landreth seeds were everywhere. The company prepared thousands of pounds of seeds for Commodore Perry's 1852 expedition to Japan. On Perry's return voyage, he carried back to Landreth the first Japanese plants ever imported to America.

In 1881, Landreth supplied seeds to General Greeley for the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, which advanced to within 490 miles of the North Pole. In the arctic climate, few of the seeds produced results. However, in 1899 some of the seeds were "rescued" by members of another expedition. It was a testament to their original quality that, after 16 years in the Arctic, 50 percent of Landreth's radish seeds germinated.

## FINDING LIFE IN OLD GROWTH

As the firm was passed down through the family, sold to an outside company, and challenged by increasing competition from other seed companies, its fortunes began to dwindle. By the time Barbara Melera and her husband, Peter, purchased Landreth in 2003, there were few signs of life left in the company. In stark contrast to the company's heyday, only here and there, in independent hardware



Above: Barbara Melera and Lisa Heinstadt, vice president of administration, review the seed inventory. Left Freshly packed tomato seeds ready for retail.



stores across the country, were Landreth seeds still being sold.

A former venture capitalist looking for a company to purchase, Barbara Melera was intrigued when a friend told her about Landreth Seeds. However, her first visit to the company's warehouse—relocated to Baltimore in 1969 by then owner Ben Goldberg—was less than auspicious. Without proper storage facilities for the seeds, the warehouse had become a haven for mice. As Melera describes it, "Mice

were everywhere, practically dancing across the floor."

The picture did not improve when Goldberg handed Melera a dingy box containing the company's history. Fortunately, mice and dirt did not curb Melera's curiosity. She began reading old catalogs and almanacs dating back to 1848. Each almanac began with a long, chatty letter from David Landreth II to potential customers, describing company events and innovations, commenting on how political events—especially those of the Civil War—affected business, and offering plenty of information on how to get the best results from his seeds.

"As I read those letters," Melera says, "I felt the essence of David Landreth. I got such a strong feeling that this company was something that needed to be saved. I

thought, 'People need to know about this.' This—this company and its history—is the essence of what it means to be an American."

## THE PROJECT BEGINS

The biggest challenge the Meleras faced was dealing with the integrity of the seed they acquired with the company. Germination tests on hundreds of bags of seed



Landreth is a hands-on company. Here Fred Weimert, Jr., vice president of operations, fills packets with carrot seed using a modern seed-packaging machine.

revealed that about as much was bad as was good.

The second challenge was to develop a catalog. Melera wanted more than a price list: "We wanted our catalog to tell a story about each seed," she says. "The old catalogs didn't have many pictures; rather, lots of words." Contrary to today's "sound-bite" culture, she says, "I think gardeners are inherently readers."

The result is a catalog that provides a link with the company's history and the gardening philosophy of its founder. Scattered throughout the pages are quotes and etchings from early Landreth catalogs, and descriptions and notations from some of the great 19th- and 20th-century botanical treatises.

Melera also wanted artwork to illustrate the flowers and vegetables, and was

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The Bloomsdale estate and nursery, which once occupied over 500 acres in Bristol, Pennsylvania, located north of Philadelphia on the Delaware River, was gradually sold off as the business flagged.

In Bristol today, the Landreth legacy can still be seen in street names, a few of the old houses, and the stone wall that enclosed the 1807 barn. The barn—in its day the largest in the United States—burned down sometime in the 1940s as the result of an

accidental fire. An elementary school occupies the site of the original estate house.

David Landreth II, planted the estate with trees brought back from around the world. Many of the trees that are still standing have been sought out and recorded by the Bucks County Audubon Society and the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania. Scattered throughout the community on individual properties, these majestic 150-year-old specimens include Japanese zelkova (*Zelkova serrata*), bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*), pond cypress (*Taxodium ascendens*), golden larch (*Pseudolarix amabilis*), dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*), and Greek fir (*Abies cephalonica*).



Charlotte Landreth Melville with a copy of the 1858 *Almanac*.



The Landreth family at Bloomsdale in its glory days.

Charlotte Landreth Melville, 83, a fifth generation descendant of David Landreth, is the only Landreth relative still living in Bristol. The other members of the family moved away 15 to 20 years ago. Melville's cousin, Symington Phillips Landreth, Jr., 55, currently resides in Texas, and cousins Charles and Peter Landreth, in their 60s, live in Philadelphia. None of them ever worked in the seed business. Melville's older cousin, Edward Landreth, was the last surviving family member to work in the seed company. He died recently in New York at age 92 and was buried in Bristol in the St. James Cemetery, where the rest of the family is interred. —P.B.

fortunate to find a graphic designer who understood her feelings about the company and how she wanted to present it.

## RECLAIMING THE PAST

Another delightful challenge for Melera has been to reconnect with long-time Landreth customers. "John A. Williams Hardware is an independent hardware store in Pennsylvania," Melera says. "I got a call from someone who was taking over the Williams family business, and learned that the family had been a Lan-

dreth customer for 100 years. They were glad to know we were still in business and, in fact, growing."

Melera is able to draw from her background in working with start-up companies to rebuild Landreth on solid financial footing every step of the way. She is pleased to have put together a small but dedicated and talented group of investors.

Some of the investors are on the leading edge of technology and entrepreneurship. Some are "avid, avid gardeners, with a huge affection for gardening, who want



## For More Information

Landreth Seeds are available online at [www.landrethseeds.com](http://www.landrethseeds.com). For more information or to request a printed catalog, visit the website or call (800) 654-2407.



to see the company survive.” Melera says, “They are innovators who treasure American history, love gardening, or made their way from an American family business. They represent what David Landreth was always about.”

Supported by these people who share her respect and vision for the company, Melera is confident about Landreth’s future. In making decisions for the company, “I’m drawing on Landreth’s past for Landreth’s future,” she says. She points to advertising as an example. “We’ve expended a lot of human and financial capital in bringing the company from the 19th century into the 21st century. I wouldn’t use capital on flashy advertising. I want grassroots support from gardeners.”

And so Melera finds time to talk to garden clubs, not just about Landreth, but about America’s other old seed houses. She wants to let people see and know the company, let gardeners see that “Landreth is a real thing,” with real people and a deep history; deep roots, so to speak, that gardeners can appreciate.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Certainly, Melera wants to make the D. Landreth Seed Company financially sta-

## DRAWING ON LANDRETH’S PAST FOR ITS FUTURE

Owner Barbara Melera says that “a lot of my inspiration comes from the three gentlemen who really made the company: David Landreth, David Landreth II, and Burnet Landreth.” She recognizes David Landreth as a businessman in touch with his customers, able to anticipate their needs; son David Landreth II, as taking the broader view, expanding the business far beyond Philadelphia; and grandson Burnet Landreth as “a moralist in the best sense,” who saw growing food as vitally important for everyone. With this in mind, Melera is focusing Landreth’s in three main areas:

**Container gardening.** Melera believes that if David Landreth could see today’s trend toward downsizing, he’d say, “Find something that will grow in small spaces.” So she’s looking for more varieties suited for containers. Her favorite for 2006 is the ‘**Fairy Tale**’ eggplant (shown at right). Says Melera, “The fruits—a beautiful purple with a bit of white stripe—are only three to four inches. You can put three plants in a half barrel and get a lot of eggplant.”

**Heirlooms.** Melera believes that David II would say, “We need to preserve for the future.” For 2006, Melera is excited to offer the ‘**Dr. Carolyn**’ cherry tomato, an heirloom white variety.

Says Melera, “This is the sweetest tomato any of us has ever tasted. After a day of sampling, this one burst on our palates like the first tomato of the day.”

**Gardening with Children.** Melera imagines that Burnet Landreth would wonder, “Why is gardening being taught to kids like a science class?” Says Melera, “Gardening is really relationship building—with a person, soil, seeds, plants—and that’s something we want to promote.” Her favorite children’s “pick” for 2006 is the tiny ‘**Mexican Sour**’ gherkin, with fruits just one inch long. Says Melera, “They’re delicious, and you can just throw them into a salad.”

—P.B.



ble. But she wants much more than that. “I want to build a reputation for this company as one of the main presences in preserving heirloom seeds, including bringing some of the international ‘treasures’ to the United States.”

Part of Melera’s plan is to keep the company small, with every staff member intimately involved in the operation. “I also want to keep the integrity,” she says. “That’s what David Landreth built his business on.”

A seasoned traveler, Melera says she would also love to create a presence in other countries—such as New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Argentina, and Chile—where gardening is a passion. “It would be great to have Landreth Seeds be part of these cultures where people absolutely love to garden.”

More than anything else, Melera is

committed to bringing this piece of America’s history fully into the present. “I bought this company for its history, but I had no idea what the act of assuming ownership would ultimately do,” she says. “I didn’t realize that the history would be so alive and so much a part of the company today. I want Landreth to find its place in today’s America, in what the economy is today.”

On good days, Melera says she’s euphoric. On bad days, she says, “I worry about letting anything happen to this treasure. I truly consider it an American treasure that I’ve assumed responsibility for, and I feel that responsibility deeply.” *m*

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