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O PIONEER Renee Shepherd started her first seed company in the early 1980s in Idaho.

The Seed Lady

Renee Shepherd turned heirloom seeds into a thriving business

Her cheerful pastel seed packets may sell to gardeners all over the country, but the roots of Renee's Garden are deeply planted in Santa Cruz. The organic seed company trials all of its product in Felton.

It all began about 20 years ago, when passionate gardener Renee Shepherd met a friend from the Netherlands who was selling seeds.

"He suggested that if I liked to garden so much, I ought to try some vegetables that were bred for flavor, because this was in the '80s when I got started, and most American supermarket weren't worrying about what things were tasting like," says Shepherd, owner of Renee's Garden.

Shepherd planted some Dutch tomatoes and French lettuce and never looked back. She was hooked on trying new seeds. By 1995, she had a mail order seed company that she sold in 1997 to start Renee's Garden. Shepherd doesn't market any seeds that don't do well here, which is measuring for the beginning farmer to seed gardener. She also scours the world for the best varieties before making her selections.

"I try to have really authentic stuff. So, for example, our Thai chili really come from Thailand, and our basil really comes from Italy. So my idea is get it where it's developed, steal it here to make sure it grows easily and then I'll choose the right variety," says Shepherd.

When it comes to her favorite varieties, Renee recommends the heirloom tomato "Camp Joy," which was developed by Alan Chadwick at the UCSC farm and garden. "It's a really nice cherry tomato whose main virtue is that it tastes like a full-sized tomato. Some people love cherry tomatoes that are super-super sweet, but this one tastes like a well-balanced full tomato flavor, and that's a neat variety." She also recommends the "Purple Hunchin Bean," which is grown more for ornamental purposes than for eating, and which Thomas Jefferson was known to grow. "The flowers look something like windia, and the bean pods look like shiny purple patent leather pods," says Shepherd, who is also excited about a newly selected variety of wax beans she's selling this year.

"Santa Cruz is a really easy place to garden. A lot of things grow really easily here," says Shepherd. "In our Santa Cruz climate, when the nights reach evenly in the fifties, except for tomatoes, peppers and eggplants, you can plant practically anything else from seed directly in the ground and be successful. We live in a gardening paradise."