





# Deep Roots

*Harris Seeds boasts a long history of serving local, small business growers*

BY OLIVIA M. HALL • PHOTOS BY JAN REGAN AND HARRIS SEEDS

**A**s winter draws to a close and the warmer days of spring slowly begin to assert themselves, eager home gardeners are gearing up for a new cycle of digging, planting, harvesting and enjoying their bounty.

In Rochester, vegetable and flower seed distributor Harris Seeds is doing much the same. “Our catalog season begins in April, and then we’re in it right until December,” says company president Dick Chamberlin. New flower and vegetable varieties will be showing off their qualities in test plots, vying for spots in one of the four annual seed catalogs aimed at commercial growers and, with select plants, at home gardeners.

Such trials hark back to 1879, when English immigrant Joseph Harris turned his experience in farming and selecting vegetable and grain seeds into a successful business venture. “The Genesee Valley back then was and still is the ‘fertile valley,’” Chamberlin recounts. “For a short time in the late 1800s, when seed companies started to form, it even became known as the seed capital of the world.”

By the time the company passed from its founder to his son Selah and, in 1949, to his grandson Joe Harris, hybrid seed—created by crossing two varieties for a new, unique variety, rather than selecting the best specimen of a crop for open-pollinated seed—was becoming wide-spread. “With a large breeding staff, Harris was on the forefront of hybridization for both vegetables and flowers,” Chamberlin says. “It became one of the dominant seed companies in the East.”

After Joe Harris decided to sell the company in 1978, Harris Seeds spent nearly a decade as part of several larger corporations, during which Harris Seeds’ breeding and distribution expertise were combined with the seed production capacities of California-based Moran to form the Harris Moran Seed Company.

But by the mid-1980s, Harris Moran decided to divest itself first of its home garden entities and later its commercial business in the East. “And that’s how this company evolved,” says Chamberlin,

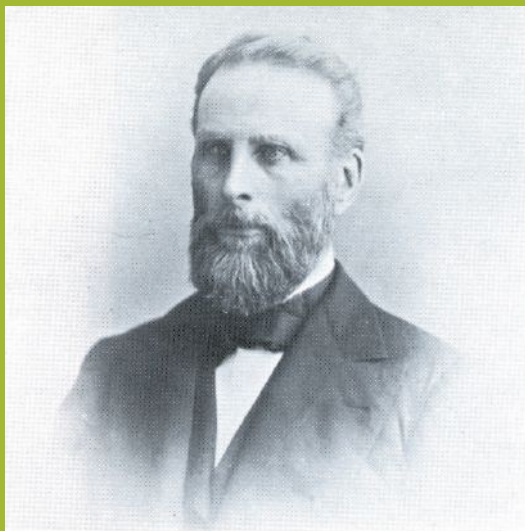
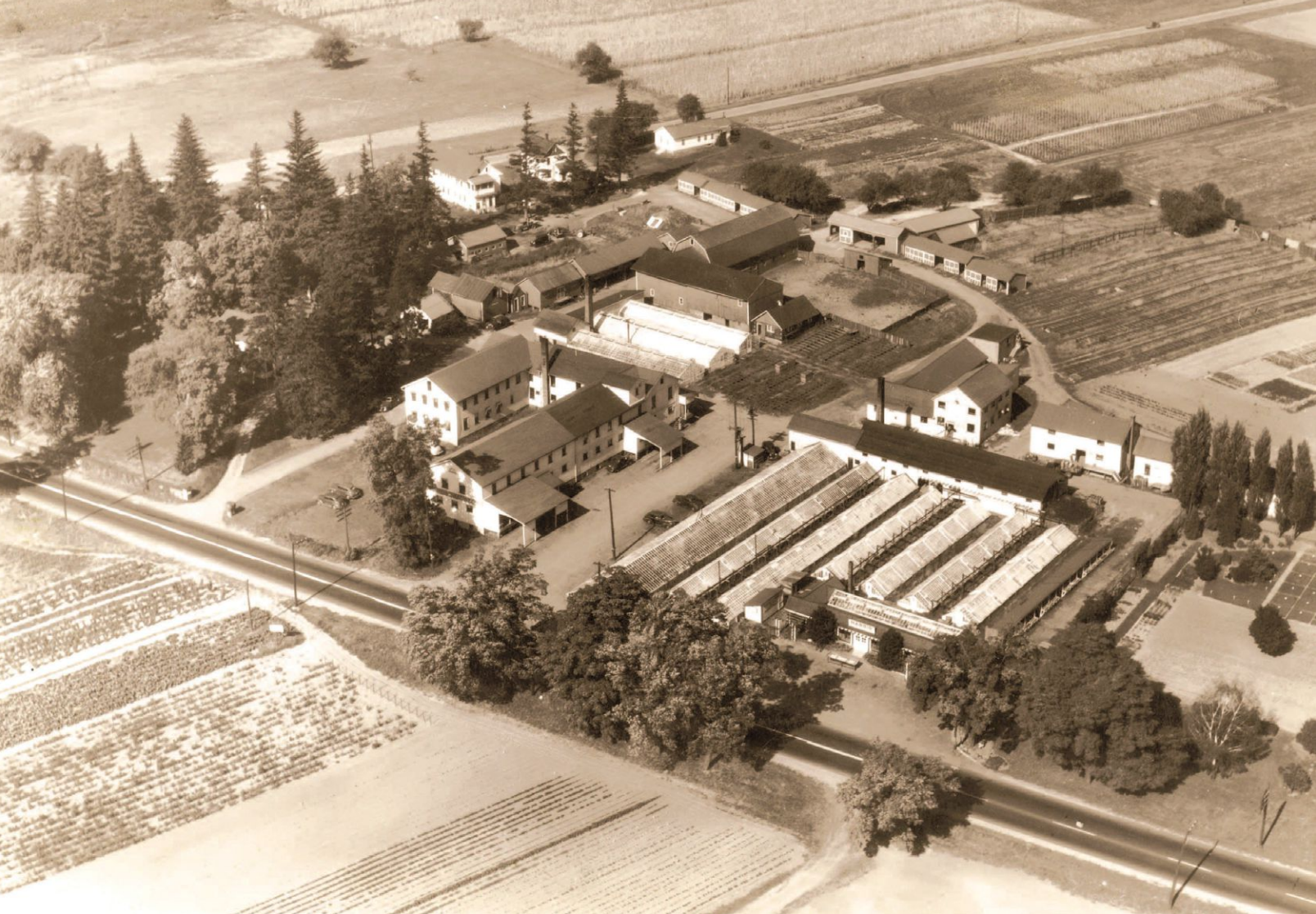
who transitioned from Harris Moran to lead the (re)emerging Harris Seeds distribution venture. “We built a staff of 40 full and part-time as well as 50 seasonal workers, and we began—or continued, however you want to put it. We’re basically offspring of the original company.” To this day, the two businesses continue to work closely together, giving Harris Seeds exclusive distribution of many Harris Moran varieties in the East, including its popular line of pumpkins.

In addition, several dozen other suppliers hope to get their products into Harris Seeds catalogs every year. “We’re looking at anywhere from 400 to 500 different varieties in our own test plots,” says vegetable seed manager Mark Willis, who has been



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with the company for 39 years and spends a good portion of his year on “trials, trials, trials, trials.” (Ornamentals manager Vicky Rupley runs similar tests for flowers.)

As the crops ripen throughout the summer and fall, Willis roams two acres of fields right by the company’s seat in Rochester, test plots at the Seneca Vegetable Research facility in Hall, New York—which grows out most vegetables for Harris Seeds—and a large patch holding up to 100 types of gourds, squash and pumpkins in Macedon. Scrutinizing, measuring, prodding and tasting, Willis evaluates each variety on a multitude of criteria.

Take sweet corn, for example. “There are about 20 different criteria that we judge, starting with how strong and clean the plant is,” Willis begins his list. “Then we see if we notice any disease on the plant. We’ll harvest several ears and take a look at the dark green color of the husk package, whether it has attractive flags and is long enough to cover the end of the ear. After that we evaluate the ears themselves: shape, diameter, length, how deep the kernels are. With bicolor varieties, we see if the contrast between the white and yellow is very noticeable. And finally we eat them raw right in the field, test for their sugar quality, taste, how chewy the kernel is. And that’s just for sweet corn.”

Pumpkins need to be deep orange and have a big handle, peppers are best with firm walls, radishes shouldn’t get pithy on the inside and all vegetables should be easy for growers to manage and resistant to disease. Luckily, Willis says, “there are so many good breeding projects at the moment, in all different types of species.”

Nevertheless, only a few dozen carefully selected new varieties make it into Harris Seeds’ product line each year, and customer favorites may stick around for decades. Take Reenie Sandsted, co-owner of Baker’s Acres in North Lansing, and her favorite Jet Star tomatoes, for instance. “It’s just one of those varieties that people have grown for years and years (since the 1970s), and they still want it,” she says. “It wouldn’t be a complete list of tomatoes if we didn’t have it.”

Once a product has made it into the catalog, Harris Seeds’ registered technician Julie Cook checks each incoming batch of seed for its germination rate by counting how many sprout after a few days on moistened blotters. During the 6,000 to 7,000 tests a year, the target rate is 95 percent or better, depending on the species. “Back in the 1900s, Harris was the very first seed company in America to test for germination and put the results on every package,” Dick Chamberlin says. “We maintain that tradition. If the germination matches what the supplier says, it’s good to go. If it doesn’t, we may reject seeds.”

To preserve this rate until the seed ships out, the company keeps its 37,000 square-foot warehouse and packaging areas fully air-conditioned, which acts as a natural dehumidifier. “We have about 10 million dollars worth of seed in the building, all live product,” Chamberlin explains. “And humidity is the real killer



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of seed.” So it’s no wonder that especially sensitive specimens—which can be affected by humidity in as little as an hour—are kept in “the vault,” a double-walled, double-insulated dry room, and that flower seeds have their own, controlled packaging area.

Like the 700 varieties of vegetable seeds, these are hand-weighed on sensitive scales and packaged in units from 1/256 of an ounce of dust-size begonia seeds to 25-pound bags of corn, beans and pumpkins. Finally, the seed ships out to more than 20,000 buyers every year, most of them small commercial growers with a few dozen acres, a fact that Dick Chamberlin shares with pride. “That is what sets us apart from most other companies, who focus on larger growers. We feel that that’s our stock and trade, and we work very hard at building relationships.”

Grower George Sheldrake, who runs Early Bird Farm’s retail greenhouses and roadside markets in Ithaca, appreciates this attitude: “We get fabulous customer service. Our sales rep, Bill Russell, is very knowledgeable about vegetables and visits me several times every year with no hurry at all. We’ve been using Harris varieties for as long as I can remember.” Chamberlin should be pleased to hear that Harris Seeds is living up to its slogan, “a grower-friendly company.”

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## SEED TIPS

We asked vegetable seed manager Mark Willis for expert tips on how to get the most out of your seeds.

### SOURCING:

Buy from local seed companies. We're testing all those varieties right here in New York. If you start buying from a company in New Mexico or California, things might not turn out as well as they would there. It's always fun to try out something exotic, but in general you'll want to grow varieties that are adaptable to your area.

### STORAGE:

The two biggest factors that destroy the vigor of seed are humidity and heat. So the more dry and cool you keep seed, the longer it's going to store for you. Don't put it in the refrigerator, which is very high in moisture, unless you can put it in an airtight container.

### STARTING:

There are always great directions on seed packets. Be sure to follow temperature recommendations, because we put those on there for a reason. If you start items on your own that you would normally buy as transplants, such as tomatoes and peppers, don't direct seed them into the garden but start them under controlled conditions in your home with lights and a heat mat, if you have one.

