

Housing Available – for Bluebirds!

You know spring is on the way when the Northern Neck Audubon Society is offering their elegant bluebird houses for sale. Felicity Ericson, the Master Gardener facilitator of this birdhouse project insists they are “new and improved” and indeed they are! They are improved by the use of handsome long-lasting cypress wood in the same perfect design to captivate bluebirds needing to upscale their homes.

The houses are better but the \$15 price remains the same, making them a great gift, especially since the directions and the necessary long screws are included. They are available in Gloucester Courthouse at “Curves” in the Edgehill Shopping Center. “Curves” may be known as a place of exercise for women, but it is always open to all visitors so do not be hesitant to stop in and shop.

What a great group, the Northern Neck Audubon Society! They are donating bird houses to be erected along a trail in the Woodville Park, a project Master Gardener Bill Walker is shepherding.

The unexpected makes news. A friend forwarded the clipping from a British paper, “The Independent On Sunday” with an article headlined, ‘Forget Antiques, start collecting old fruit and veg’. It went on to add that traditional produce is becoming so valuable that Sotheby’s is auctioning them.

The sale, ‘The Art of Farming’ was held in New York City, tickets to attend \$250, for charity. According to the Nov-Dec ‘Garden Design’ magazine some of the treasures on the block included ‘Ozette’ potatoes, ‘Lady Godiva’ squash and ‘Isis Candy Cherry’ tomato as well as packets of open-pollinated seeds.

A lot of the inspiration for Sotheby’s involvement in the effort to raise money for Grow NYC’s New Farmer Development Project was Amy Goldman, authority and author on heirloom produce. While still working as a clinical psychologist, she grew good things to eat and eventually collected 38 blue ribbons at a county fair due to her mastering the horticultural demands of heirlooms, those open-pollinated varieties of fruits and vegetables passed down by generations. Heirlooms became an additional career!

These older varieties fell out of favor when taste became less important than the ability to survive long shipping. Uniformity became important for canning operations and appearance became the criterion when the purchasers had no experience with a real garden or orchard.

One of her books, “Melons for the Passionate Grower” (2002) won an annual Garden Book Award from the American Horticultural Society. Her book assures the home gardener that he need not grow melons “posing” as cantaloupe and “the green bowling balls that pass for watermelon.”

Goldman grew over 1000 different tomatoes before selecting the best 200 for her 2008 book “The Heirloom Tomato: From Garden to Table: Recipes, Portraits, and History of the World’s Most Beautiful Fruit.”

Beyond taste, there is the crucial diversity of germplasm that is important. If the number of varieties continues to shrink, there will be a spectacular increase in pests and diseases.

In England, for example, there is increasing demand for older varieties, especially of apples. At the National Fruit Collection on Brogdale Farm in Kent, there are 2000 different apples and cuttings are sold to growers eager to use them as grafts to preserve the rare varieties, some of them dating back to the 1700s.

Lest you think Sotheby's has neglected their normal clientele, their 'Magnificent Jewels' auction sold a 27.2 carat Tiffany diamond necklace for 3.6 million dollars. That day's action sold more than 49 million dollars of jewelry, a record, but especially notable in such volatile economic times. In any year, that is a lot of lettuce.