



CHAMPION OF RAREST VEG

'Seed detective' Adam Alexander is working hard to preserve the flavours of yesteryear. **Sue Bradley** meets the 'Indiana Jones' of vegetables

There is no mistaking the location of Adam Alexander's garden, with its view of the Severn Bridge and Mendip Hills beyond. But look a little closer and it is clear there is more to this vegetable plot than meets the eye.

For growing in its raised beds, polytunnels and containers is a wide range of produce that is never found on the shelves of supermarkets.

There are large and fleshy African tomatoes, prickly Syrian cucumbers and the longer runner beans imaginable, plus all manner of chilli peppers, courgettes, broad beans and peas.

All in all this plot in Itton, on the edge of Chepstow, is no ordinary garden. It's the operational headquarters for the 'Indiana Jones of vegetables'.

Adam is on a quest to save the world's

heritage produce, particular varieties that have been grown in certain spots for generations but which are at risk of being lost forever because their seeds are not available on a commercial basis.

Many of these vegetables may not look quite like the uniform examples that we have grown used to, but have a flavour all of their own that is often far superior to anything on sale in the shops and, just as importantly, are intrinsically part of local cuisine and suited to the environment in which they have been produced for scores if not hundreds of years.

Adam's interest in these 'heirlooms' began several years ago while he was working on a filmmaking project in Ukraine, investigating the story of the Welsh engineer and businessman John Hughes who was contracted by the Tsar to create a Russian steel industry in a spot now known as Donetsk, but was previously



PHOTO BY **JESSE ALEXANDER**



called Yuzovka - Yuz being an Eastern European approximation of Hughes. A hotel workers' strike led Adam to visit a farmers' market in search of ingredients for a meal for his colleagues, and it was here that he encountered an unusual sweet and fiery pepper, and was introduced to the type of figure that would go on to become the most important person in his seed-hunting life.

"Wherever I was, she would come in the form of what is, I think, a character familiar to most: an 'ideal granny type, usually of diminutive height, but always a powerful presence,'" explains Adam in his new book *The Seed Detective*.

"This remarkable and wonderful breed of grower is often to be found in markets worldwide, selling vegetables and fruits that she has been cultivating for years.

"And because she has little money, buying expensive seed from a merchant is unthinkable.

"She saves seeds from her crops, which may well have been grown on her small plot of land for generations."

Like these venerable women, Adam carefully saves a few seeds from his latest discoveries, bringing them back to Chepstow and trying them out in his own garden.

Often he'll harvest more from his own successful sowings, sometimes passing them on to Garden Organic's Heritage Seed Library so that others can have a go at growing them and, in doing so, preserve these vegetables for future generations.

While his filmmaking work has taken him to all corners of the globe, leading him to encounter many more 'ideal grannies' and their vegetables, Adam is equally aware of the many wonderful Welsh varieties grown by generations of gardeners that are not available from most commercial outlets, such as the climbing bean 'District Nurse', a Borlotti-type with mottled dark purple shells.

"It was grown by a lady in Cardiff who donated it to the Heritage Seed Library and said she had been given the seeds by a district nurse," Adam explains. ➔

Other local varieties Adam has helped to preserve include the Stenner runner bean, a long-time favourite on show benches due to its length; the Brecon Black, a runner bean with black seeds that was once grown widely in the region, and The Rhondda Black Bean.

"I was giving a talk locally and a guy came up to me and said he grew the Rhondda Black Bean," says Adam.

"He was part of a cohort of amateur breeders taking well known varieties and selecting them for different qualities.

"They're part of a tradition of plant breeding at a very local level that goes back to when we first started to grow domestic crops thousands of years ago.

"The Rhondda Black is a fantastic bean, very firm with many small beans and lovely flesh and a great runner bean flavour."

Other local finds include the 'Llanover' pea and the 'Graham's Tom Thumb' tomato, grown near Cardiff for decades.

While heritage vegetables have interesting back stories and provide gardeners with produce that looks and taste different from what they can buy in shops, Adam is keen that they are not grown simply so that they can be compared with others, but to be valued by the place or society that has them as part of their cuisine.

To this end he is keen to find chefs interested in taking some of Wales' culinary heirlooms and using them to create new and exciting dishes.

"Every village in northern Catalonia has its own bean and its own dish for which it's the key ingredient, and my challenge for Welsh chefs is to do the same; to create something using a vegetable that's distinctively local, like 'District Nurse,'" he says.

"To achieve this we'd need to scale up production of these varieties, and it's great to see some local growers starting to do this.

"Vegetables are the Cinderellas of our diet. Once people start to think in terms of having some ownership of them, they can start to change their habits of what they eat.

"I would urge anybody with a garden or allotment, or some kind of access to growing, to ask if there's a Welsh variety they can eat and to grow that.

"Thirty years ago, I never thought of vegetables as being rare or endangered, or how they were embedded in the social traditions of their native food culture – and that they had their own stories to tell."

• *The Seed Detective, Uncovering the Secret Histories of Remarkable Vegetables* by Adam Alexander is published in hardback by Chelsea Green, priced £18.99.

chelseagreen.co.uk/book/the-seed-detective

