Lisa Von Saunder is pictured in a raised-bed garden. Typical of most 18th-century gardens, this one is planted with vegetables, flowers and medicinal herbs.
LISA VON SAUNDER’S GOAL WAS TO BECOME AN ANTIQUES DEALER. LITTLE DID SHE KNOW THAT SEEDS WITH A PAST WOULD MAKE HER DREAMS COME TRUE!

IN MIDS-NOVEMBER 2010, Lisa received an email from Adrian Higgins, the highly respected author and garden columnist for the Washington Post. An acquaintance who was working on a garden project for the Smithsonian had told Higgins about the seeds he received from a company in Pennsylvania called Amishland Heirloom Seeds.

Intrigued, Higgins emailed Lisa with the idea of doing an article. To Lisa’s surprise, he insisted on coming to Lancaster to conduct an interview and see her one-woman operation. As it was nearing Thanksgiving, she was a bit baffled. What would she show him? “Everything was dead!” she explains. Higgins, she reports, was a delight. “We spent hours talking. I showed him the remnants of the garden. They article ran in the November 18 edition of the Post and Lisa’s life immediately changed. “I will forever be grateful to Adrian Higgins,” she says. “My life changed overnight. My business quadrupled within a week and stayed strong for the next year.” She credits the surge in business to the fact that newspapers across America picked up the article, which also went viral thanks to the Internet. FOX43 did a news segment, which was distributed to other FOX stations. “I could tell where the story ran or aired by tracking orders,” she explains.

Actually, it was another man – Thomas Jefferson – who inspired the concept of Amishland Heirloom Seeds. Fifteen years ago, Lisa visited TJ’s (as he’s known in the museum world) beloved Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia. “I visited there a lot as a kid,” says Lisa, who grew up in Maryland and Virginia, and refers to Jefferson as “a huge hero.”
1. The all-purpose Howard German tomato.
2. Last year was a banner year for cabbage in this area.
3. A Russian heirloom watermelon called Astrakhanski.
4. Tuscan kale – also known as dinosaur kale – is extremely nutritious, as one cup supplies 100% of your daily value of vitamins K and A, and 88% of your daily value of vitamin C. Plus, it is a rich source of organosulfur compounds that are linked to cancer prevention.
But, this visit was different – Lisa uses the word “epiphany” to describe it. This time, Lisa became fixated on the garden where antiquity was growing in the form of tomatoes, beans, peppers and flowers whose lineage could be traced to the early 1800s. Despite the fact that she had absolutely no gardening experience, Lisa realized she had found her calling. She decided to devote the next two years to learning everything she could about gardening and heirloom seeds.

Luckily, Lisa’s hero worship had provided her with a Jeffersonian-sized library. “I have every book about him, as well as copies of his gardening journals” she explains. Calling him a Renaissance Man, she explains that Jefferson was America’s first foodie, as he was interested in all aspects of food – from growing it to eating it. “He was very hands-on,” she says of the role he took in planning and planting the gardens at Monticello, using Philadelphia nurseryman Bernard McMahon’s book, The American Gardener’s Calendar, as his guide.

Jefferson’s two-acre, terraced garden contained 24 square plots in which over 300 varieties of vegetables were grown. The technique enabled him to plant his favorite English peas ahead of his neighbors and continue harvesting other edibles well into the fall. Jefferson’s stint as Minister to France introduced him to the continent’s delicacies such as Italian squash and French figs, both of which he grew at Monticello. The Lewis & Clark expedition provided him with an array of beans. He was excited to receive seeds for the newest arrivals to these shores – tomatoes, eggplant, broccoli and cauliflower. Much to his consternation, the only thing he couldn’t nurture were grapes, which sorely disappointed this wine connoisseur.

Jefferson named the seeds he received after their providers, places of origin, a characteristic of the yield or the season in which the harvest occurred. Seeds were carefully saved in order to ensure that future crops would yield the same characteristics and flavor profiles. Jefferson laboriously recorded every nuance of the crop – from planting to growth to harvest – in his journals. In viewing his garden as laboratory, it was Jefferson’s goal to narrow the selection down to the two or three best performers so as to not weaken them through cross-pollination, or what he called “degeneracy.”

Lisa notes that Jefferson’s gardening tactics were “light years ahead” of the era in which he lived.

Jefferson’s diet was also ahead of its time, as Lisa explains he was a near-vegetarian. Indeed, Monticello’s website contains a Jefferson quote: “I have lived temperately, eating little animal food, and that ... as a condiment for the vegetables, which constitute my principal diet.” Jefferson’s gardening journals relay that information, as they share his habit of planting lettuce and radishes every two weeks in order to provide an uninterrupted supply of salad ingredients. Sesame was grown to provide him with a palatable salad oil.

While Lisa was teaching herself about gardening, she earned a living by taking what she calls “horrible jobs” in which she usually ended up performing tasks that were totally foreign to her talents. When she left the last job, she decided it was now or never to launch her business. She began driving the back roads of Lancaster County looking for seed sources. “If I see people working in a garden – especially Plain people – I’ll stop to talk,” she says. Most people are receptive and will share gardening stories, which inevitably lead to seed tales.

One acquaintance – Irene Sauder – shared her glass-bean seeds with Lisa. “They snap the best,” she says of their name. “But, they’re almost extinct. It will take years to build up a good supply of them.” She also shared her sugar peas, the seeds of which Lisa is also trying to save.

Equally fascinating was Irene’s family tree, which she could trace back to the early 1800s. The stories of the seeds are woven among the branches of the tree. Lisa guesses that like many heirloom seeds found in this area, these were brought from Germany. “People coming to America didn’t know what to expect, so they brought a memory of home with them. Seeds were the original comfort food.”

Actually, many seeds made round-trip voyages. The tomato is an example. The original explorers found them growing in Mexico and took them back to Europe and beyond. Seeds then made the return voyage to be grown in the gardens of colonists.

Lisa named her company Amishland Heirloom Seeds in order to emphasize the Lancaster County connection, and her specialization in Amish and Mennonite seeds. Realizing that such a concentrated area wasn’t large enough to support a business, Lisa reached out to the world by launching a website and writing for specialty publications. The tactic worked. An article she wrote for Farm & Ranch magazine prompted Plain people in other areas of the country to share seeds and stories with her. And, the website snared a famous visitor: Martha Stewart. “I received an email from her inviting me to come on her show,” Lisa explains. Unfortunately, because of conflicting schedules, the guest appearance never happened. “It’s just as well,” Lisa says. “It probably would have wiped out my available seed stock that I had for sale at the time.”

Other website visitors shared seeds, helping her expand her inventory over time.

Now, she offers rare seeds from around the world. Skirret is an example. The root vegetable lost favor in the 1800s and all but disappeared. “I believe I’m the only one to offer it in the United States,” Lisa notes, adding that a seed company in England contacted her about purchasing a quantity that would have required growing six fields’ worth of plants.

While Lisa grows some plants herself for seed-saving purposes, she relies on a friend who is a rancher in Idaho to grow the bulk of her bean and fruit plants. “Cliff started out as a customer and when he offered his help, I happily took him up on it,” she says. A recent move to a farmette on the outskirts of Adamstown has reenergized Lisa. The century-old property boasts a small barn and plenty of room for the raised beds she prefers for growing plants.

While tomato seeds are her most requested product, she
explains that the seed-saving process is labor intensive. Adrian Higgins described the process in his blog, explaining that Lisa starts “by scooping out the gelatinous seeds, placing the goop in a little plastic tub and pouring in tap water. The fermenting process is foul. The liquid gets stinky and must be stirred at least once a day. Lisa uses chopsticks, and covers the tub with filter fabric to stop flies from showing up. It’s that bad. After three to six days, she rinses it out by placing the mess in a series of sieves. The mesh must be small enough to retain the seeds. The seeds then must be dried meticulously. After blotting them, she places them on disposable plates that have a plastic coating, so the seeds can dry and won’t stick. Seeds that are not completely dry run the risk of germinating in storage, rendering them useless. This takes three to six days, depending on ambient temperature.”

“Lots of seeds need to ferment – it kills diseases,” she explains. “It’s a seed-saving step that’s often ignored.”

**Why is there such an interest in vegetable gardening?** Lisa credits it to a number of reasons. She points to the economy, saying people are trying to trim their grocery bills by growing their own vegetables. She also believes parents are not trustful of the food system and are trying to shield their children from pesticides, etc. And, she credits first lady Michelle Obama’s White House kitchen garden for promoting gardening as an educational activity that children can enjoy. As for the interest in heirloom seeds, Lisa takes pride in the fact that her little company is playing a role in fostering awareness of America’s gardening history. Through her seeds, she is helping to preserve the past and make it available for the future.

To learn more about Amishland Heirloom Seeds, visit amishlandseeds.com.