

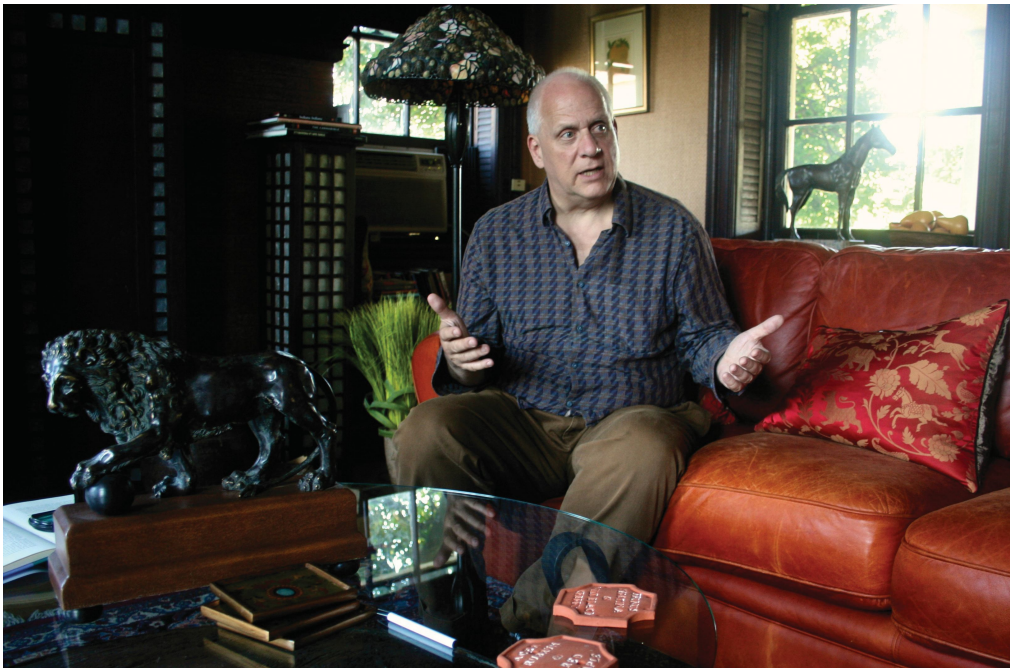


**W. Atlee Burpee & Co.  
Warminster, PA 18974**

“Cool, cruel winter fertilizes the very human creations that keep us warm: home, culture, cooperation, tradition, song, legend, music, art, etiquette, festivity, comfort and joy.” *from FordhookVoice.com, a blog written by George Ball*

### **“Burpee Seeds Grow”**

“I have been blessed with the opportunity to lead the Burpee Company,” said George Ball, a third-generation seedsman. “Carrying on a tradition that had been going on for 20,000 years gives me a good feeling.” Ball takes the long view, a perspective that serves his company well.



*Photo credit: Dean Fosdick (AP)*

This connection with the history of W. Atlee Burpee Co. and indeed with humanity itself drives him to keep his products exemplary, and the joyful act of growing from seed alive in the public consciousness. By 1915, the year Washington Atlee Burpee died 37 years after founding his seed business, W. Atlee Burpee Company had become the largest seed company in the world. The forthright slogan it adopted late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “Burpee Seeds Grow,” may seem overly simplistic to today’s gardener, but at that time reliable seed was the exception rather than the rule. It made such perfect sense that the catchphrase hit home with farmers and gardeners alike.

### **Success Followed Innovation**

In South Jersey, where W. Atlee Burpee lived in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, conditions were very different from those in Europe. So naturally, the crops that the immigrants brought with them from home did not adapt well to the warmer climate. Burpee had started a poultry business as a young man, selling mail-order chicks to farmers and homesteaders, but after realizing that his customers were unhappy with the quality of the vegetable seed they relied on, he began selling seed as well.

An innovator by nature, Burpee was familiar with the breeding work of Gregor Johann Mendel; in fact, there is evidence that he conducted his own breeding experiments with poultry. This desire to improve the genetics of the products he sold soon made its way into his seed business. Every year, as he toured Europe seeking seed stock, he made a point of taking a second look at varieties that did *not* succeed in the cooler climates. These provided the inspiration, if not the seed stock, for his early hits: Surehead cabbage (1877), Iceberg lettuce (1894), and Burpee's Stringless Green Pod (1894). The list swelled, and W. Atlee Burpee Company grew quickly.



The Burpee trial gardens are an attraction for local gardeners.

### **Burpee Today**

The company continues to pride itself on its innovations. In 1998, Burpee purchased Fordhook Farm, the Burpee family's ancestral home in Doylestown, PA, and now home to the display gardens where employees test new varieties. "We want to help people grow more, and grow better," says Ball. Time and space, he explains, are limiting factors for today's gardeners. "If we want to capture the Millennials we need to put the 'Wow' factor into gardening." This might mean breeding more productive patio plants, super-sized ears of corn, heavy-bodied fall greens, or even more meat-like vegetables. "Our 'On Deck' hybrid sweet corn, the first sweet corn suited for patio planting, changed the game. We sold millions of packets!"

The emphasis on attracting more gardeners also explains the company's decision to maintain two separate catalogs: The Burpee seed catalog and The Cook's Garden. As Ball explains it, one is Country Music, and the other is Mozart. Burpee's inclusive product line supplies both ends of the gardening spectrum.

### **George Ball's Advice for Seed Growers**

- "Know your yard," emphasizes Ball. Each property is an amalgamation of microclimates. Know where the sunlight stored by a stone wall might allow for early planting, or where a dip in the yard might act as a frost pocket.
- "When to sow is the biggest anxiety factor among gardeners." Ball advises consulting the Agricultural extension offices for timing advice.
- "Take a chance on a fall crop." Fall frosts are mild, compared to winter frosts. The ground still holds a lot of heat.
- "Experiment! Try a little of this and a little of that to discover what is *you*."

## **The Burpee Foundation**

Although it maintains a low profile, the Burpee Foundation, a philanthropic organization also headed by Ball, has been making a difference around the world for decades. With urban gardening projects in Philadelphia, New York, L.A., and Cleveland, and interests in Haiti, Somalia, Rwanda, and other besieged locations abroad, the foundation is more about “keeping people alive,” says Ball, than about raising their gardening consciousness. A recent program put a 12-packet Welcome Home Seed Garden into the hands of 165,000 returning war veterans.