



Renee Shepherd, Renee's Garden Felton, California

Renee's Garden grew from Renee Shepherd's passion for seeds, gardening and cooking. And it shows—in her informative how-to videos on the company website, her three garden cookbooks, and in her always enticing vegetable descriptions!



Renee has traveled the world in search of the best varieties for home gardeners. In the 1980s, Renee had just relocated to California to complete her PhD in Intellectual History. She found a home on 4 rural acres, started a garden, and began inviting fellow grad student families for potlucks. That's how she met Cees Boonman, who later went on to become the long time CEO of Ball Horticulture. Boonman looked over Renee's vegetable garden and suggested some European vegetable varieties bred for especially good flavor. Renee grabbed the opportunity. Before long she had started her own mail order seed business—Shepherd's Garden Seeds—and had made it her mission to introduce American gardeners to great tasting specialties such as wasabi arugula, mesclun salad mixes, dinosaur kale, striped beets and many other vegetables that were not yet well known to American gardeners. To ensure she had the most flavorful varieties, Renee began traveling to seed companies in Europe to see and taste what they had to offer.

Several decades later, Renee is still at it! Her current company, Renee's Garden, offers seed to home gardeners directly online and through independent garden centers and nurseries.

Most of her 27 employees work near Renee's home and the company's main trial garden located in northern California, near the Bay area. Still acutely focused on selling the most flavorful, productive, easy-from-seed vegetables and flowers from around the globe, Renee seeks out and tests varieties from seed producers and companies both large and small. Currently in her trial garden are seed selections from Thailand, Japan, Great Britain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Brazil, Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary... and the list goes on.

Innovative seed packet descriptions entice and educate. Renee's Garden seed packets are different from most. Because the business is not just about selling seeds but also about educating gardeners, each packet has an extra flap with a description that could only have been written from first-hand experience. Pull the flap up, and you'll find complete growing instructions. Renee writes every packet description herself. Go to reneesgarden.com and you'll find how-to videos on sowing mesclun, growing sweet peas, cover cropping, and more, as well as Renee's recipes for Roasted Pumpkin Soup, California Stuffed Chard, Chocolate Chip Carrot Cake, and other delectable dishes. She has written three kitchen garden cookbooks that feature garden produce. Her latest book, [The Renee's Garden Cookbook](#) offers extensive gardening advice as well as a wide range of garden-to-table recipes.

Each season, the company donates seeds to non-profit organizations. Community gardens, school gardens, gardens for the homeless, prison gardens, and many other organizations seeking to grow food to feed the hungry all over the world benefit from this program. The company's extensive outreach and donation program is a practical reflection of Renee's personal mission to teach the world to garden.



“I don’t sell anything unless I have grown it myself,” says Renee. “We cook and evaluate all vegetables and herbs and make bouquets of all the flowers.” Testing and evaluating vegetable and flower varieties is a critical part of her mission to find the very best seeds for home gardeners. And staying at the forefront of gardening and cooking trends keeps the business relevant and thriving.

Renee’s large test gardens are made up of numerous raised beds and containers managed using the latest organic techniques and products. Varieties that do well in this USDA zone 8 garden are then trialed in Middlebury, Vermont, in USDA zone 4. The reason for this, Renee says, is that “we want to sell varieties that grow well in both mild and cold climates, so we can offer our seeds with confidence to gardeners all over the country.”

Photo: Renee and her employees trial hundreds of varieties each year.

Do’s and Don’ts from Renee

#1: DON’T Sow Seeds or Set Out Seedlings Too Early

Be strong: resist the temptation to sow your garden on the first warm spring weekend. Heat-loving summer annuals will not thrive and grow well until the soil has warmed up and spring weather conditions are warm and settled with outdoor night temperatures consistently above 50-55°F (10-13°C)

#2: DO Thin to the Proper Spacing

Thinning to the final spacing means taking out extra seedlings that have germinated too close together, leaving only those that are at the proper distance apart so they have enough space to thrive and grow to maturity.

#3: DO Build Good Soil

There is a very simple gardening Golden Rule: the better the condition of your soil, the better garden you will have. The best way is to work several inches of organic material into your garden soil to improve its balance, texture, and water-holding capacity.

#4: DO Fertilize Both Organic and Conventional Gardens

Even if you have good soil with a high organic content, remember that most plants need supplementary nutrition in the form of fertilizer for best growth and to produce the abundant harvests we all desire. Plan to feed monthly; it really can make a big difference in getting successful, high-yielding plants.

#5: DO Read Packet Backs First

We try our very best to provide the information you'll need to be successful. Please don't neglect to read and use this information as a growing guide, especially if you are a beginning gardener.

#6: DO Store Extra Seed Properly

The worst enemies of successful seed storage are humidity and heat. Never leave leftover seed packets outside in the garden or garage or in an unheated outdoor shed. Sealed mason jars and freezer-weight ziplock bags make ideal storage containers. Keep seeds dry, and in your coolest room.