By Kylee Baumle

When the growing season has come to a close, there are plenty of related activities to keep me connected to the garden. By association, I've become much more interested in butterflies and other insects, birds, worms, and anything else that affects or is affected by what we grow on our property.

The monarchs and hummingbirds have fled. The robins are loading up on the juicy red berries on our Washington hawthorn trees. Wooly worms are inching along as they seek the perfect spot for their winter hibernation location.

As I was working outside a couple of weeks ago, I noticed the sound of a nuthatch above me. White-breasted nuthatches live here all year round, but what I was hearing was a red-breasted one. I saw him as he flew to the feeder in search of something to eat. We're on the northern edge of the wintering grounds of the red-breasted nuthatch and they aren't commonly seen here.

But we're experiencing an irruption, which is when large numbers of certain species of birds travel outside their normal territories in search of food. Apparently, the pine cone crops further north are down in number. Seeds in those cones are the red-breasted nuthatch's favorite snack.

Besides keeping the feeders full, we try to allow some annual and perennial seed heads to remain in the garden to the benefit of birds wintering here. I will save some seeds for planting next year, but others will be food at a time when it can be hard to find.

We grow a lot of coneflowers, due to the influx of a number of new cultivars (cultivated varieties) in recent years. I don't save any of their seeds for planting, because the chances of seeds of those hybrids producing plants like the ones they came from are iffy, at best. But I do allow the seed heads to remain, since birds love them, especially the finches.

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Seeds from hybrids tend to produce offspring that can be a myriad of things. You might get flowers that look like either of the parent plants, which may or may not be what you wanted. There's no way to predict. The only way to grow a hybrid from seed and be assured that it will be that hybrid is to buy them from a source in which the seeds were produced from the direct pollination of a specific parent plant with another.

In most backyard gardens, natural offspring of hybrid seeds are open-pollinated. Bees, butterflies, moths, and other insects do the pollinating and who knows where they've been? The results can be some beautiful flowers, but they may not look like those hybrid plants that produced the seed.

You may have seen the term "heirloom" used in regard to seeds. I like to describe heirloom plants and seeds as those that are "as God made 'em." That may not be entirely technically accurate, but it works for me. The definition of an heirloom plant or seed varies, depending on who you talk to.

The first hybrids became available in 1951 and it wasn't until the 1970s that hybrid seeds became commercially available. It's generally accepted that seeds available prior to the 1950s are considered to be heirlooms. With a few exceptions, heirloom seeds will produce plants that look like the ones they came from, with only an occasional rogue offspring. Heirloom plants grown from seed saved year to year will adapt to their environment over time, but their appearance will not change perceptibly.

Examples of heirloom vegetables are Brandywine tomatoes, Kentucky Wonder bush beans, Bull's Blood beets, and Dill's Atlantic Giant pumpkins. Flowers come in heirloom varieties too, some with delightful names, such as Kiss Me Over the Garden Gate, Love-Lies-Bleeding, Johnny Jump-up, and Lemon Queen sunflower. I'll be saving my Lemon Queen seeds for next year, as this a favorite of insect pollinators, especially bees.

Do you save seeds from your garden for planting the next year? Do you avoid cutting back some of your plants specifically so that birds can munch on their seeds? What are some of your favorite heirloom plants?

Read more at Kylee's blog, Our Little Acre, at www.ourlittleacre.com and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre. Contact her at PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com.