Know your farmer: Perry Phillips

As the cold winds and snow blew in February, Perry Phillips was at work in his humid 80-degree wood-stove stoked basement. At his well-equipped potting bench, seeds are sorted and sown, cuttings are plucked and planted. “What I like best is when you start your plants and cuttings in February that means springtime is not far away,” he says. “The worst thing is when you leave things outside when the weatherman predicts low 40s and it went low 30s, and you find they’re all laying over sideways because they got chilled. That has happened about once every year.”

The results of Phillips’ experiments, his “hobby”, are homegrown bushes, perennials and vegetable plants that populate the perimeter of his spacious East Main Street, Jonesborough, yard and fill his basement. Phillips grows bushes such as golden euonymus, nandina with and without berries, spirea, althea, knockout roses in a rainbow of colors, holly, butterfly bushes and “tame” thornless blackberries; perennials, such as Lenten roses, hostas and ferns; and vegetable plants such as heirloom and traditional tomatoes and ornamental peppers. Cucumbers and squash are still snug in the warm basement until time for their debut.

All flora seem to flourish in Phillips’ hands. His affection for nature, he says, springs from his upbringing. “I grew up on 50-acre farm 10 miles below Jonesborough in the Conklin Community with my Mom, Dad and sister,” he says. “I came along in 1950. We grew corn, tobacco, alfalfa, oats and raised cattle, chickens, ducks, all of the above …

“We grew things from the time I was knee-high. We always had big gardens because we grew our own food for the winter – beans and corn and stuff. A lot of times we saved our own seed. You didn’t go out and buy it. You can save your own seed for a year or two and it will maintain its genetic qualities.”

As a third- and fourth-grade teacher at Jonesborough Elementary School for 37 years, Phillips found ways to propagate his love for biology. “While I was teaching, we always did things with the kids pertaining to seedlings, planting things in springtime, raising butterflies from larvae, turning them loose when they had reached their maximum,” he says. “The kids always seemed to like it.”

Phillips won’t sell a plant until it is large, lush and hardy, and that takes patience, often years from seed to full flower. “I grew those blue Big Daddy hostas from seed,” he says, reflecting on his experiment. “All hostas bloom and produce seed, and I thought, ‘Well, I’ll just try to grow me some of those.’ It took three years for them to be ready.”

Phillips also likes growing knockout roses. “People tend to like my roses because they are bigger than you can find anywhere else. I rehabilitate them, but it can take up to two years to get them in the condition I like.”

Phillips seems especially proud of his rows of carefully cultivated tomato plants, all from seed, and mostly heirloom. Each is unusual: the Cherokee Purple, an Indian heirloom tomato with “a real study big stem and large foliage and large tomatoes;” Black Cherry and Lemon Pear that “will grow like crazy, producing 200 tomatoes probably per plant;” Lemon Boy and Jubilee, medium-sized yellow tomatoes; Dagma’s Perfection, an heirloom yellow with red streaks; and Peach tomatoes, “the size of a golf ball to a tennis ball with fuzz like a peach.”

And don’t forget the Big Boys. “Some people,” he says with a wry grin, “will say, ‘Don’t you just have any red tomatoes?’ ”

He’s ready for them.

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Perry’s growing tip:

As a result of his years of experimentation, Phillips has unearthed one crucial secret to growing the biggest and hardiest plants and he is not shy about sharing it: “Lay the fertilizer on it – plenty of water, sunshine and fertilizer.”