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Seed saving

BY DON TIPPING

At one time not long ago, seeds men (or women as the case may be) occupied an important link in the food chain of nearly all rural communities. Farmers either grew their own seed or trusted in small family-run businesses, which stewarded old varieties or worked on developing new ones. With few notable exceptions, this continued to be the primary mechanism through which farmers bought seed. Two exceptions are worth mentioning for history's sake. The first was the W. Atlee Burpee seed company which initially took advantage of free postage until the turn of the century, to develop a loyal customer base of over one million catalogs shipped in 1915. At that time it was the largest seed company in the world, with 300 employees. And second, in Pennsylvania, George Washington Park printed his first seed list (with a hand-printing press) in 1878 at the age of 15 and grossed \$6.50. He persevered and also capitalized on free postage at the time to deliver the Floral Gazette magazine and seed list. This became Park Seeds, a burgeoning seed company with 800,000 catalogs going out in 1918. These two seed companies predominantly catered to gardeners. However, farmers were not to be swayed by lavish catalog descriptions and still relied on local seeds men.

Where are our seeds men now?

Growing the seed we need is where I encourage young farmers to direct their attention. Meditating on what has helped our farm to become successful, secure and rewarding is helping us in developing a diversity of niche markets. This has enabled us to grow on an artesian scale and receive just compensation. Diversity also helps our farm organism to evolve in multiple directions, thereby fostering ecological resiliency, multiple income streams, and opportunities for stacked functions (seed crop wastes becomes poultry food, animal bedding and compost).

Growing biodynamic/organic seed is one of the most promising niches which currently exists in organic agriculture. A recent Washington Department of Agriculture study revealed that less than 20 percent of the seed used on organic farms is grown organically. The other 80 percent is a vast opportunity area. Although the USDA's National Organic Program (NOP) rule states that organic growers must use organic seeds, an enormous loophole exists: if a growers tries three sources and none of them have the variety they want, or if the price or quality are unacceptable, they can simply use conventionally grown seed. Hence many organic growers sidestep the organic seed-search requirement and source their seeds wherever they choose as long as it isn't fungicide-treated. At some point in the future, organic certifiers will more strongly require that organic growers make a more concerted effort to use organic seed. Therein lies opportunity.

Where will all this certified organic seed come from?

That is where you come in. Our world, people, plants and animals beseech us to close our resource loops. Producing bioregionally adapted seed is a critical step towards reducing pest and disease problems in our crops, on par with the need to generate soil fertility on-farm. However, seeds are easier to move around than compost is, so I propose a compromise to the overwhelming task of every farm needing to grow all its own seed. Let's return to supporting bioregional seeds men and women. Most agricultural communities have farmers who have been tinkering with their own varieties for decades. Oftentimes these farmer/landrace varieties have been selected (bred) to perform well despite disease, insects and climate stresses. This processes of developing "farmer" varieties is how plant breeder Raoul Robinson suggests that we achieve horizontal, or elastic resistance in plants in his landmark book, *Return to Resistance*.

Some communities are fortunate to already have small, family-run seed businesses. Siskiyou Seeds (Williams, OR www.siskiyouseeds.com), High Mowing (VT) (www.highmowingseeds.com), Turtle Tree (NY), Uprising (WA) (www.uprisingseeds.com), Peace Seeds (OR) and Wild Garden Seeds (OR) (www.wildgardenseeds.com) are just a few examples. Farmers would do these and similar businesses a great service by buying seed from them, growing seed for them, or honestly communicating their likes and dislikes of current varieties and specific growing challenges so that we can work to develop the seed we need. Generally, we create a better local seed system if we can strengthen these feedback loops. Seed companies can work with local growers to help conduct variety trials or share samples of breeding work in progress. Farmers can help direct future organic plant breeding by communicating their needs. Also farmers can do participatory plant breeding as advocated by the Organic Seed Alliance in Washington State, working with plant breeders, university specialists and seed companies.

Now we're talkin'

Participatory Plant Breeding is one of the most exciting elements to emerge from the ongoing discussion about bioregional seed systems. Young farmers looking for a life in biodynamic farming are strongly encouraged to delve into this fascinating field. Consider liberating yourself from a life of harvesting and washing vegetables and trucking them to some city that you may or may not actually enjoy spending time in, instead become an active participant in the process of plant domestication.

Now we're talkin'

Domestication is an ongoing process, which requires us to be fully engaged in for it to yield successful results. The real reason some heirloom vegetables don't perform as well in your market garden, as the modern hybrids, is that active breeding and selection of these varieties stopped over 50 years ago. Nearly all plant-breeding resources at most agriculturally-oriented universities are now focused on transgenics. Well, lets pick up the slack and get to work on helping to create the heirlooms of the future and restoring the gems of the past.

On our farm, we weave plant breeding into every plant we grow for seed. Sometimes it is as simple as rouging, and pulling out all the early bolting plants in a population and feeding them to the sheep. Other times its crossing different strains or varieties to create something new. Although seed production is a passion of mine, I feel that it is critical that it doesn't occur in a bubble, isolated from the real world of market gardening. I really appreciate the opportunity to take produce, that we have grown from seed to market or to our cooperative Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, and get the direct reactions and impressions of people who are eating these plants. We have found many creative ways to dovetail commercial-scale seed growing with our CSA program and supplying a local farmers market. A few examples of this are:

- Lettuce for seed: we grow three rows on a bed and then harvest the middle row for market or CSA because the seed plants get so much larger they use up the space. If we wind up not needing them for market, they stay and grow into seed plants.
- Onion bulb selection: most of our culls are completely suitable for fresh market use.
- Calendula flowers dried for herbal use and seed production in the same area.
- Rouged plants fed to livestock.
- Seed byproducts as value-added items (tomatoes, pepper and melon flesh dried in the greenhouse for winter storage).

I have hosted young would-be farmers as interns for the past decade. Many of them are seeking a meaningful way to achieve right livelihood while being emotionally, spiritually and mentally engaged enough to want to keep at it. Strictly speaking from my own experience, seed growing fulfills these human needs in these awkward times when many of us are uncertain of what we should be doing with our time. A farmer working with seed also draws us into the important role of being spokespeople for freedom from corporate control of our seed supply. It also helps qualify us to articulate the necessity of restricting the uncontrolled