

Gone to Seed

Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders. Henry David Thoreau

I was in my thirties and already had children before I even decided on a career. Now, as I meander into old age, I know that nothing in life has transcended my love of Nature and profound desire to be engaged in it. Gardening is the means for that engagement and teaching, the vehicle for sharing the good feelings it evokes.

As a grandmother now I think a great deal, often despairingly, about the damage we have done to the Earth. I wonder what it will be like for my grandchildren as they grow up. Two recent experiences have given me great hope for their future and a role for myself in the process of shaping it.

Both experiences that supported my personal quest to understand Nature's ways and commitment to translate that knowledge into actions that would inspire others to be resource stewards centered on the ancient practice of seed-saving. Past practices may just be the yellow brick road to the future, and not an imaginary one.

The first experience involved attending an organic seed-saving conference in the Pacific Northwest. I saw the listing for the event online and, in an impulsive moment, registered for it. Only later, when I had examined the agenda more closely, did I realize that I might have made a serious error. Though a passionate gardener, I feared I was getting in over my head. I would be among crop breeders, experienced farmers and university scientists. Not belonging to any of these groups, I felt much trepidation about participating. I even considered requesting a refund. But, logic prevailed and I convinced myself that I was bound to gain something from either the content of the conference or the networking opportunities it afforded. Besides, it was still a good excuse to visit my sister in West Seattle.

Much to my surprise and pleasure, I returned home with a notebook full of ideas and was truly energized to start saving seeds in earnest. I might even make the leap to selecting seeds and using them to breed plants suited to our region. As a result of the four days in snowy Port Townsend, I also began to contemplate how to creatively integrate my

new knowledge about seeds and the politics of seed saving into my school programs, summer day camps and public visits to my sustainable garden.

I was clearly ready to begin the next phase of my life and the conference had been transformative in this respect. I proudly wear a t-shirt with the conference theme on the back promoting the vision of the sponsoring organization:

"Advancing the ethical development and stewardship of seed"

Wearing it is my personal recognition of the gift of life that is in each seed, our life's dependence upon seeds for edible crops, and the need to protect germplasm from loss (not just for us but for other living things as well).

From reading just about everything horticultural I could get my hands on, I already understood the basics of botany, soil care and plant-pollinator associations. But seed-saving with the goal of fostering bio-regionally adapted food plants...now that was something new.

The conference provided a refresher course on genetics and reinforced the importance of seed saving to food security world-wide. I learned that seed libraries were being established across the country, seed exchanges were becoming increasingly common and that internship opportunities were available to train the next generation of farmers. I also found out that there was such a thing as seed school.

Seed saving and growing out seed are the logical next step when one is a serious gardener. In fact, seed saving requires the same skills that a gardener already possesses, with perhaps a bit more discipline necessary in the record-keeping and storage departments. Careful observation, patience, intuition, creativity, awareness of the need to rotate crops, respect for the soil ecosystem are some of the items in the master gardener's skill set. Add to these skills the willingness to provide the labor and the funds to make the limited investment in supplies and equipment and you are ready to go.

An awareness of the general impoverishment of the food system in this country that impacts all ethnic and income groups in some way—also drove me to consider seed-saving. Thus, when I saw a notice about *Native Seeds/Search* Seed School in Tucson, Arizona, I jumped on the opportunity. No, this was not an impulsive decision like the first had been. Rather, it was an act of faith, vision, commitment and

hope. Yes, I did say I was a grandmother. That puts me in my sixties and makes this new undertaking a brain fitness activity as well – something new to learn.

A few facts that are now part of my seed-saving advocate's vocabulary might influence you as they did me:

- According to the Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, 96% of food crops available in 1906 are no longer available.
- Where thousands of types of food plants were consumed historically, now only 15 plants and 8 animals constitute 90% of human food; 12 plant crops make up 75% of the food consumed in the world; 3 plants – rice, wheat and maize - are now relied upon for more than half of the world's food.
- Multinational corporations have acquired many seed companies, limiting production of many varieties and offering instead their own patented genetically modified seeds (GMOS)
- Land grant universities were in part created to provide seeds for farmers, but most of their research now supports further privatization of what was once part of the public domain.

So why save seeds:

First of all, it is to reverse the decline in seed diversity implied by the preceding facts.

Other reasons:

To combat hunger and encourage self-sufficiency locally and globally

To support the culinary traditions of different cultures

To promote biodiversity of plant species in general

To foster healthy local food systems with bio-regionally adapted crops

To insure the availability of particular types of desired seed

Because it's engaging, educational, challenging, and just plain fun

It is a great way for your family and you to connect with Nature

And finally, it keeps the most basic element needed for food production in the hands of the diverse many rather than the powerful few. Don't put all of your eggs in one basket, so to speak.

Seed saving also gives rise to stories of great human interest and builds relationships within and between communities. For me it is another way of working with nature and appreciating its brilliance and beauty. Working with seeds inspires awe and feeds my spirit. The Organic Seed Alliance conference and Seed School were life-changing experiences and will certainly influence both my vocation as an environmental educator and avocation as a gardener seeking self-sufficiency.

The OSA conference had provided the motivation and background on seed saving and its importance in terms of global food issues. Seed School gave me the tools to apply my new understanding.

Since real students never graduate, it didn't seem odd to me to be going back to school. The reactions of those with whom I shared my excitement while not surprising, were disappointing. I watched eyes glaze over as I mentioned my new (consuming for me) interest. I had to respond over and over again to the same question "What is Seed School?" I guess it just shows how disconnected we Americans have become from the sources of our sustenance.

With seed saving I am taking a number in the long line of human history; stepping right into life eternal and expecting to love every moment of it! This is not just a new hobby – it is a passion. I now know the rules of the game, its importance and the star players. The ball is in my court.

All our major food crops were originally developed by amateurs. Until recently, all gardeners and farmers saved their own seed; all gardeners and farmers were automatically amateur plant breeders – and amateur plant breeding was the only kind of plant breeding there was. Carol Deppe, Breed Your Own Vegetable Varieties

I hope you will join me in this quest. Here are some resources to help you on start your journey

Seed School

Native Seeds/Search www.nativeseeds.org

Seed Libraries in N. CA

BASIL (Bay Area Seed Interchange Library) Berkeley, CA
www.ecologycenter.org/BASIL

Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library Richmond, CA
www.richmondgrowsseeds.org seed library and classes on seed-saving

Organic Seed Alliance Pt. Townsend, WA www.seedalliance.org
supports the development and stewardship of genetic seed resources through education, advisory services and research...

Xerces Society – www.xerces.org Portland, Ore. Invertebrate conservation with special emphasis on pollinators and agriculture

Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy - Oakland, CA
www.foodfirst.org An organization promoting food justice and food sovereignty through policy advocacy and programs in partnership with small farmers around the world.

Center for Food Safety www.centerforfoodsafety.org

Ecological Farming Association www.eco-farm.org

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