

July 19, 2017

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Feeding the Seedy

Local growers say save, exchange, repeat.

March 11, 2009, 12:00 am

By

By Cullen Curtiss

Long before agriculture became an industry, farmers were saving seeds from their harvest for replanting the following year. It was not only practical, but necessary for survival.

The practice continues today, as does seed sharing or exchanging, and some would argue it's still necessary for survival. Sprawling networks of seed enthusiasts communicate online and through the mail. Local seed exchange events occur throughout the year, some in the form of community get-togethers, others in the form of conferences that also offer presentation topics ranging from the threat of genetically engineered and genetically modified organisms (GEs and GMOs) to the latest ways to thwart a pesky bug.

For Adam Mackie, owner of Talon de Gato Farm and the mind and muscle behind the Dixon Community Seed Exchange, now in its sixth year, seed saving and exchanging are critical. The challenging growing conditions in New Mexico demand it.

“There used to be a lot of regional seed houses with seed varieties grown locally, adapted to local conditions, but the number of seed houses and the variety they offer has

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inevitably gone away. And commercial seed is becoming more and more specialized to the big growers,” he says.

When Mackie speaks of the regional heirloom seeds gracing his exchange, such as the Peñasco fava bean, short-season corn and San Juan melon, he grows increasingly passionate. These varieties have become perfectly conditioned over the course of many years and yet, if not appreciated, could disappear completely.

“Most years Ana Mae Salazar gives me some of her Velarde chile, which she has been growing for 50 years,” Mackie says, “but it probably goes back one way or the other as a local land race for several hundred years.”

Generally a crop needs to be harvested for at least 25 years before it can be considered heirloom, but there’s little point in absolute definitions, suggests Emigdio Ballon. As the director of agriculture at the Tesuque Pueblo and designer of the Symposium for Sustainable Food & Seed Sovereignty, he thinks of the heirloom (or heritage) seed as life force.

“Food is the key to life,” Ballon says. “One thousand years ago [the Pueblo] was independent and sustainable, and we would like to be this way again.”

At this juncture, 65,000 transplants of arid land crops are established at the Pueblo, as are active bee hives, goats and chickens. Seeds are harvested and preserved at the Pueblo for its people, as well as for organic commercial companies and other organizations. They also are given away at Ballon’s fall symposium. “Especially in the case of economic disaster, we want to be able to provide for any people,” he says.

Paula Garcia, executive director of the New Mexico Acequia Association, organizes the annual Land, Water, and Culture Conference and Seed Exchange. She hopes to cultivate a “living seed exchange,” a network of families who are dedicated to growing a little extra in order to produce seed to share.

Seed exchanges tend toward the chaotic: Seeds may come from all over the world, are offered on fold-out tables in open baskets and sacks, and arrive by mail in envelopes, boxes and bags. There is an unwritten pledge to be absolutely forthright about the nature of each seed—this is, after all, an exchange of one of civilization’s most vital resources.

To aid people in their selection process, Mackie separates the commercial seed from the heirloom or specialty seed. “I handle seed differently if it is from an experienced grower I know and trust than if it just shows up at the seed exchange in an old coffee jar from an unknown grower,” he says. “My overwhelming experience, however, over 20-odd years, is that varieties from other seed savers have grown true to type.”

At most exchanges, the general idea is to take enough seed to grow a small seed crop. This may not be enough to yield an eating or selling crop, but it’s enough to plant a full crop the following year and share a bit of its seed.

But for Joshua Cravens, owner of Jardin del Alma Farm and project director of Arid Crop Seed Cache, an up-and-coming bank for rare seed (98 percent of which is traditional to New Mexico), there are unseen dangers at seed exchanges.

“There’s the issue of contaminated seed being spread and people not knowing it,” he says. “The commercial crops available as genetically engineered technology are spreading the contamination.”

One of the biggest GE- and GMO-seed producers in the world, Monsanto Company, calls



the contamination that Cravens speaks of “adventitious presence” (AP). Garrett Kasper, Monsanto’s manager of public affairs says, “In agriculture and food production, AP means the trace amounts of unintentional seed, grain or other ‘stuff’ from one plant variety getting into a different variety. The USDA has established guidelines for crop production and determined a 5 percent threshold of unintended stuff could get in and the crop could still be considered organic, conventional or whatever.”

Call it what you will. Many farmers cite and side with Percy Schmeiser, a Canadian canola farmer who claims his fields were contaminated with the Monsanto GE-variety Roundup Ready canola. Monsanto claims, “Schmeiser saved seed that contained Monsanto’s patented technology without a license” and then planted it.

Bob Pennington, who founded Agua Fria Nursery in 1975, says seed exchanging is about access. For more than 30 years, he has been collecting seeds from all over the world through the mail via the [North American Rock Garden Society](#) and the [American Penstemon Society](#).

“You are essentially bypassing Monsanto by exchanging heirloom seeds,” Pennington says, “and, one way or another, they’ll try to find a way to control everything and dictate what we plant. If it were not for exchanges, there would be no heirlooms. Thank goodness we’re all subversives.”

Mackie does not fear contamination from corporate mutations in New Mexico: “If GMO is the main concern, do not accept seeds of the GMO crops—corn, canola or soy, the major GMOs in the US.”

He is concerned about corporations pushing legislation to allow more patenting of seed varieties, however. “Many farmers [in New Mexico] have been saving their seeds for generations and, if the seed companies are able to patent part of that genome, they could prevent us from saving our own seed or from selling it. And that’s miserable.”

Kaspar claims Monsanto has no position on traditional breeding and seed saving. “Biotech coexists right alongside non-biotech production. Traditional breeding and saving and sharing open-source seeds continues to play a role in agriculture, and farmers will adopt the technology and seed that works best for them and their individual markets.”

For farmers like Ballon, coexistence is not tolerable.

“We want to keep the Pueblo out of genetic engineering,” he says. “We respect Mother Nature and so do not agree with the modified seed.”

Celebrating Communities and Seeds: THE 4th annual Land, Water, and Culture Gathering and Seed Exchange

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New Mexico **Senate Bill 560**, the Farmer Protection Act, is designed to protect farmers' liability issues with regard to GE-seed companies.

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