

Organic Seed Growers Conference

In January, I attended the 6th biennial Organic Seed Growers Conference hosted by the Organic Seed Alliance. I have a little experience and a lot of interest in organic vegetable and flower seed production. So I went looking to gather ideas and skills to enhance Growing Home's organic vegetable production operations. Joined by 300 conference goers from the U.S., Canada, Korea and the Netherlands, I spent three days touring coastal Washington, listening to inspiring speakers, attending *how-to* workshops, gathering materials, and sharing ideas (and seeds).

Here are some highlights from my trip.

The 2012 conference was held in Port Townsend Washington, near one of the world's foremost seed production regions, Washington's Skagit Valley. Coastal Washington, with its mild and not very variable climate, offers ideal conditions for production of cool-season crops like spinach, cabbage and broccoli. Much of the world's supply of spinach, cabbage, and beet seeds are grown in the Skagit Valley. The value of these crops seems to have shaped the culture of the region. There is a high level of cooperation between seed growers (both large and small), University programs, and seed companies. All are acutely aware of their dependence on others and work closely to ensure that seed crops receive proper isolation distances and rotations for disease control (14 year rotations for some crops!). Farmland here holds value as *farmland* throughout most of this region, unlike elsewhere in the U.S. where development value trumps agricultural value.

Seed stock:

Until very recently, farmers and gardeners grew, dried and stored much of their own seed for planting their fields and trading with neighbors. The result was a global seed bank of great diversity, with each seed finely adapted to a particular place, particular conditions, and a farmer's particular taste.

But things have changed. Growers no longer rely on their own seed stocks. Few gardeners or farmers have kept or relearned the specific knowledge required for growing quality seed. Most seeds are now purchased from glossy catalogues, chosen from among few variety options for their appearance in color photographs, with little or no regard for their long-term adaptability to a particular place. Specialty vegetable and flower growers rely on few varieties of hybrid seed to produce consistent crops that meet the standards now demanded by customers who equate size and appearance with quality. A few large seed corporations now *own* seed genetics, controlling their distribution and use. The result is a woefully diminished seed bank. Of all the fruits and vegetable varieties in existence in 1903, 96% are now extinct. There are relatively few varieties sold commercially, and seed in our National Germplasm Repositories ages in drawers as Federal funds are directed elsewhere. Contamination from genetically modified plant pollen threatens organic seed production worldwide, and sometimes compromises a farmer's right to use seed.

Despite all this, there is hope. The goal for the Organic Seed Growers Conference is to share the basic knowledge needed to produce high quality seed, and to inspire a nation of organic seed advocates. New seed companies and cooperatives are popping up to serve specific regions, some with emphasis on old world varieties and some exclusive to

homegrown seed stock. Some communities are even creating Seed Libraries for community sharing and expansion of seed.

Pollinators:

As one might expect, pollinators play an important role in the reproduction of many crops. Though some plants have mechanisms to self-pollinate or depend on wind currents to distribute pollen among plants, more than 70% of plant species depend on some kind of animal-mediated pollination. Worldwide, 35% of food crops are dependent on pollinators. This means that without pollinators, these crops would fail to produce the fruits we eat and/or the seeds we eat and plant. Cultivating healthy populations of pollinating insects and birds is therefore important, not just for gardeners and seed growers, but for anyone who eats. Unfortunately, there has been a frightening decline in both managed and wild populations of pollinating insects. Since 1950, the number of managed honeybee colonies has dropped 50%, and feral colonies have declined between 70% and 100%. With 1,500 native bee species in North America in decline, farmers need to do a better job of creating and maintaining healthy native habitats on and near production sites. Just as soil health and clean water are essential to crop production, pollinators too are essential tools in a farmer's toolbox. The Xerces Society is an excellent source of information on pollinator conservation.

GMO Seed Study:

Few people know that the World Bank conducted a four-year study on the impact of GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms) worldwide, and found some very interesting conclusions. The World Bank found that:

1. GMO's are not needed because they do *not* increase intrinsic yields *and* they don't respond to climate change;
2. Industrial agriculture and trade agreements like NAFTA and GATT benefit northern partners only (farmers in developing countries see no significant benefit);
and
3. Agroecology and local food economies are what's needed.

The study is both uplifting and disheartening – uplifting because it tells what so many of us already knew or suspected – disheartening because the study was commissioned by Monsanto, and when Monsanto learned that the conclusions were not beneficial to its marketing plans, it pulled funding and the report remains unpublished. The studies' findings and its censorship from public knowledge add volume to the call for organic farmers and gardeners to stand up and take control of our seed future by growing organic seed – and for every person who eats to advocate for organic seed production.

-Tracy Noel

Growing Home's Rural Production Manager

Resources and Recommended Readings:

- Organic Crop Breeding, Edited by Edith T. Lammerts van Bueren, James R. Myers
- Home Seed Saving, by Carol Deppe
- "A Seed Saving Guide for Gardeners and Farmers" downloadable from Organic Seed Alliance
- Shattering, By Cary Fowler, Patrick R. Moone - An old book about origins of agriculture.
- Check out online tutorials, including webinars of select workshops from the Organic Seed Growers Conference - <http://campus.extension.org/course/view.php?id=377>
- If you're really into growing your own seed or looking for specific characteristics in a new cultivar, check out the Variety trial database at <http://eorganic.info/novic>
- Seed Matters is launching a fellowship program to fund 5-year doctoral programs in organic plant breeding - <http://clifbarfamilyfoundation.org/Special-Initiatives>