

Stroud Community Seed Bank

Why save seed? - the bad news

Early history

The first commercial seed companies started appearing in England in the 1500s with the increasing urbanization of the population and the appearance of commercial market gardeners. Before this people didn't really buy seed at all, but grew their own and swapped with neighbours. Even right up until the 1800s, most ordinary home gardeners saved most of their own seed, and the seed companies were only for commercial growers and wealthy people.

Mechanisation and F1 hybrids

After the second world war, agriculture became increasingly mechanized and supermarkets replaced local greengrocers. Plant breeders started creating varieties that worked well in this new system – they were uniform, ripened all at the same time, were robust enough to withstand mechanical harvesting, and lasted well on supermarket shelves. Science labs also started producing F1 hybrids, which were vigorous, uniform – and profitable! Only the biggest companies survived in this expensive large scale, high tech world and many small local growers, seed breeders and seed suppliers disappeared.

EU laws

In the 1960s the European Union attempted to improve the quality of seeds being sold, by regulating the industry. Each country produced a definitive list of all their different vegetable varieties and it became illegal to market any varieties not listed. Many local or heirloom varieties never made it on to the list, and new varieties can only be added to the list after rigorous and expensive testing.

Where we are now

- Most seed catalogues offer varieties that have been predominantly bred for use by commercial, mechanical growers, offering traits that home gardeners don't want or need.
- Most seed offered in seed catalogues is grown overseas where it is warmer, and drier, and land and labour are cheaper
- Seed saving skills and knowledge are rare
- Genetic diversity is being lost; uniform crops of just a few dominant varieties are more vulnerable to pests, diseases and weather
- F1 hybrids are increasingly common, quite expensive, and can't be used for seed saving. Genetically modified seed is even worse.
- Globally, just a few massive companies (Monsanto, Bayer, Du Pont, Syngenta) control over 60% of the seed market between them.

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Why save seed? - the good news

There are loads of really good reasons to save your own seed and swap it or share it locally. By saving and swapping seed we can grow the unusual, special, local or heirloom varieties that are not available in commercial seed catalogues. We create a connection to the past, to each other, to our place in the world - and a route to a more sustainable future.

Local adaptation

Over time, varieties grown continuously in a particular climate or soil adapt to those conditions and thrive in them better than standard seeds. In the past many areas had their own varieties of lots of different types of vegetables.

Good for home gardeners

Back garden and allotment gardeners have different priorities to commercial field scale producers. We like tall peas that can't be harvested mechanically but give more yield in a small space, tomatoes that are ugly but delicious, varieties that crop over a longer period to avoid gluts, and so on

Connections to people and places

Many people save seeds that have a story to them. Growing the seeds that you brought from your old home, that were given to you by a dear friend, or from a variety that you loved as a child can give a great sense of connection to the people and places that matter to you, creating a link to both the past and the future.

Genetic diversity

Different varieties carry genes for resistance to different pests, diseases or climatic conditions. By keeping variety and diversity alive we're creating a more resilient system.

Satisfaction, self reliance and sustainability

If we want to talk about sustainability, we need to know where our seeds come from. By saving our own seeds and sowing them next season we are able to really see the whole process of growing our own plants, which can be interesting, fun, and deeply satisfying. And we might even save a bit of money on the way.