

## **Grassroots Seed Activism in the UK**

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Gardeners have a long history of saving and swapping seeds, the fundamental unit of the food chain. In the past these practices were informal and benefitted everyone; guaranteeing seeds for the following year, increasing the range and quality of plants available and conserving and sharing species and varieties that were particularly locally adapted.

Over the last century however we've got used to buying (nearly)all of our seeds, professionally produced by agri-business companies. This development has effectively, if unintentionally, acted to reduce the number of varieties and so genetic potential of the seeds available; a process accelerated by the requirements of commercial growers. They are by far the biggest customers for seed companies and tend to favour such qualities as uniformity of appearance, increased vigour and thicker skins (to limit damage during transport) over flavour, character and sequential fruiting or flowering (to minimise gluts).

Add into this mix the development and widespread availability of highly engineered F1 seeds and the situation is further exacerbated. These seeds are carefully selected and bred to amplify desirable characteristics such as disease resistance and increased yield. Unfortunately this is at the cost of viability. Saved F1 seeds, if not completely sterile, tend to produce unstable and weak plants, thereby compelling gardeners and growers to buy new seed every year. Whilst this may be expensive and annoying to western growers in the developing world such crucial a limitation could be ruinous and is rightly the focus of much protest.\*

These forces, aided by commercially supportive and protective EU legislation which requires that seeds sold are officially listed (the UK National list or EU Common Catalogue -which was originally introduced to guarantee the health and vitality of the seeds), have increased significantly in recent decades to such an extent that it is estimated that we have lost more than 70% of the vegetable varieties that were available in the UK 100 years ago.

It was against this context of acknowledging the disappearance of genetic diversity from common circulation and actively opposing the corporate conglomerations behind this process that grassroots swap and saver events such as Seedy Sunday came into being. In short, Seedy Sunday envisages an alternative role for seed in a food economy which encourages the strengthening of local food systems. Inspired by an anti-Monsanto/genetic engineering Seedy Saturday attended in Canada in 2001, Seedy Sunday Brighton is currently the biggest seed swap in the UK and this year celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. On February 6<sup>th</sup> 2011 it welcomed nearly 1800 people to a day of swaps, talks, growing and seed saving demonstrations and very good local food. This success has in turn inspired numerous local seed swaps around the country, a consequence which Seedy Sunday actively encourages and supports. Whilst the exact number of new swaps is unknown, a glance at the list reported in a national newspaper, The Independent (February 5<sup>th</sup> 2011) notes eleven others around the country during February alone, which gives a snapshot of the level of the interest and activity.

The slightly broader picture is that – as with many other parts of the world – environmental consciousness has been on the rise for decades. Founded in the UK in 2006, a parallel (now global) movement, the Transition Town Network, which is primarily concerned with minimising CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and adapting to life after fossil fuels have significantly dwindled, is responsible for many of the other swaps around Britain. Indeed, in common with Seedy Sunday, the network is very concerned with raising the issue of food security and subsequently promoting local food systems. Getting involved with a local transition initiative or indeed founding your own is a great way to link into a burgeoning and supportive international ecological justice agenda.

## UK Seed legislation

These are interesting times for seed savers and swappers in the UK. It seems that after many years of upholding a reductive and highly distorting system, the EU government has finally partially acknowledged officially what it has long said privately; namely that the listing system is absurd, particularly in the context of ‘amateur’ growers.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> August 2010, The UK Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA) launched a consultation ‘on the transposition of Commission Directive 2009/145/EC requiring Member States to provide a less stringent framework for National Listing and marketing of conservation or heritage varieties of vegetables and of varieties intended specifically for *amateur gardeners*’ (authors italics) that were of ‘no intrinsic value for crop production but developed for growing under particular conditions’. This means that, whilst national listing will still be required to enable a seed to be marketed, the process aims to be much simpler, quicker and hopefully cheaper to do so. This is not much of a concession as in practice it will still limit the variety of ‘heirloom’ varieties able to be sold, but it does at least signal the beginnings of an EU acceptance that keeping more of a range of vegetable seeds in circulation will do much to broaden and protect genetic diversity.

The consultation is now at an end and the resulting comments are due soon. Whilst this is slightly positive news for the UK – but still very far from ideal – it is only protective for amateurs. It seems that for even the smallest scale grower will still be highly restricted in what they can grow commercially.

Within the EU and the USA, home of the major agrochemical seed companies, without a commitment to allowing and supporting diversity on a mass scale we are left with the same small group of plants in cultivation; old favourites rapidly become unavailable and unknown, disease risk increases and opportunities diminish. In more vulnerable societies, where the effects of climate change and challenges such as evolving plant diseases, water restriction and soil depletion are likely to be felt first, this is a much more urgent limitation. By letting vast amounts of our natural heritage disappear we lose so much beauty and genetic potential.

In contrast by keeping up the pressure on ‘big-pharma’ companies to be more flexible, saving seeds, swapping and growing them we can be highly active in supporting and encouraging a vital variety. Plants grown for the quality of their flowers, the food or medicines they produce or the habitats they support all have an absolutely crucial role to play in this respect. By protecting the right for all to save and swap seeds we are upholding a tradition that stretches back centuries yet may be our best hope for the future.

\*As noted by Seedy Sunday committee member Neil Cantwellin *The Ecologist*(2004)

‘This is just the latest example of the potential of using seed as a starting point for identifying the nature of and thereby resisting the forces of corporate globalization, as has been demonstrated by the work of Vandana Shiva. In the creation of her school of the seed, BijaVidyapeeth, she explicitly places the metaphorical lessons to be learnt from the seed at the heart of providing an alternative vision of globalisation of which Seedy Sunday seeks to be part’.

## References:-

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