

# HEALTH-IN-THIS-PLACE

In their most sophisticated iterations, seeding strategies reflect the deeper insights of holism. We graduate from asking "When and what do we sow?" to "Which seeding approach makes the soundest ecological sense?" What, in fact, am I seeding, and why?

Take, for example, the issue of hybrids - plants that do not breed true to type. The primary incentive for breeding hybrids is not, as the seed industry would have us believe, because it makes possible the creation of varieties that 'outperform' open-pollinated equivalents; nor the requirement they force on farmers and gardeners to return each season to purchase seed (although this is a very attractive feature). Rather, companies grow and sell hybrids because such seed 'locks in'

a profit opportunity by protecting it from encroachment by competing seed companies. Open-pollinated plants (OPs) can be copied by a competitor and reproduced, essentially, for free: hybrids cannot. As a result, billions of dollars have been and continue to be devoted to seed breeding techniques which create food crops that are, by definition, degenerative.

World class OP varieties which outperform their hybrid cousins in all key characteristics, exist; (Black Beauty summer squash, Market more cukes, and Aci Svri peppers come immediately to mind) and many more would be in circulation but for the fact that 'economics' incentivizes their wholesale destruction. When you sow an OP as distinct from hybrid seed, you make a conscious choice to move toward an inherently sustainable world.

## GOING DEEPER

As you begin saving seed, a fundamental shift in outlook necessarily follows: 'the seed as tourist' (hybrids are, in essence, plants that have had a sense of place simply bred out of them) in your life, is supplanted by 'the seed as home-maker'. Now, seeding is no longer a process which begins and ends with putting a seed in the dirt. It is an act which embraces the entire plant cycle, from seed to seed and, critically, year through continuing year. Now, the seed you plant has the potential to befriend you, your family, your community and your bioregion, for life. Now, with each seed you put in the ground, you enact the potential to invoke a conscious act of Stewardship. Your seeding strategies and tactics morph accordingly. Which plants does it make sense to seed? Which seeds does it make sense to plant?

Just because we can raise a seed (grown and harvested elsewhere) into an edible plant, does not mean that the type of plant or variety will reliably complete its cycle and mature seed in our local soils and climate. What we seek are plants that not only feed us, but which possess an inherent capacity to reproduce well hereabouts - to sustain not just us, but themselves, too. Seed saving prompts us to recognize such plants. At the same time, it affords us the opportunity to selectively save seed from particular plants which



Viola Der Gart. Mainz, P. Schöffer, 1485.



Hero's SCHACHTAFELN DER GESUNTHEYT, Strasbourg, 1533.

demonstrate: early maturity in our bioregion, resistance to slugs, drought tolerance, or a broad array of other traits which, in toto, actively improve the line's capability to reproduce here.

## TACTICS EVOLVE

Seeding tactics evolve. Lettuce, a crop which lends itself easily to seed stewardship, produces dry seed in fluffy stuffs atop the plant - making them highly vulnerable to fall rains which can soak and ruin a seed crop. And so we seed the lettuce varieties we wish to save, especially bolt-resistant varieties (which, because they hold out against the tendency to flower, are slow to make seed) earlier than other varieties. Our climate can make maturing melons difficult: and so we zero in on OP melons such as Hoogen which, because of their smaller size, mature seed earlier.

Once we begin saving and replanting our seed as a defining priority in our relationship with our food - when we carry over the evolving 'memory' of our co-evolutionary relationship with our food, from year to year, and can witness how our choices, each season affect the character of

the germplasm in our stewardship, our approach to fundamentals tends to shift, markedly. Take George Stevens' observation: "From my experience of 12 years of growing food & seed crops... Imbalanced [high] fertilization results in an effect referred to as 'levelling the playing field,' where natural selection is defeated by pumping OP plants to uniformity. With moderate fertility only the strong will survive and make seed. A low-input approach may at first be lower yielding... but aspiring seed savers shouldn't be discouraged."

The immoderate regimen which typifies food growing as we currently practice it - which involves throwing much fertility and water as we can get away with, at our dirt, and pushing our harvest, front and back, as far as our techniques allow - produces fat, immediate yields; but at the cost of suppressing the natural intelligence which allows us to recognize and help usher forth the germplasm possessing the deepest sense of health-in-this-place.

## THE PAYOFF

As it happens, the crop improvement that accompanies a frugal localization dense doesn't take very long at all. I see clear evidence in the seed stewardship efforts of locals who are striving toward the creation of a low-supplement culture of the soil - one more in keeping with the way Nature works. Whenever I encounter a deepening tendency among seed savers toward balanced, conscious stewardship of soils, water and air, the foundations of our world, I witness a marked increase in the health and yield of the plants growing there - with less needed in the way of management & input. The dance between local seed and local ecology is both intimate and fruitful.

The experiences of those who are discovering what it is to embrace the Long View more fully suggest that greater awareness with regard to stewarding local ecology, and a shift in the priorities associated with saving and raising seed, are one and the same thing.

Marana tha.

