

Swapping Your Seeds

Fancy trying a Llanover Pea or an Ivory Egg Tomato? Seed swapping groups are discovering unusual and exotic varieties of vegetables and saving them from extinction. **Ruth Stokes** investigates.

You probably wouldn't think it, but the type of vegetables we choose to plant in our gardens are increasingly important. Because the majority of the seeds we buy are bred to have certain qualities (the right size, shape and colour, for example) many natural varieties are dying out. In pockets around the UK, however, gardeners are meeting to swap their seeds with one another, discovering unusual and exotic varieties of vegetable - and, amazingly, saving rare varieties from extinction.

A growing movement

The Heritage Seed Library (HSL), which works to safeguard rare vegetable varieties, believes there to be as many as 50 seed swap groups around the UK, from city groups, such as Leeds and Haringey in London, to Brighton and more rural locations. Neil Munro, acting head of the library, says that he's seen the movement grow significantly in the past few years. 'When I first heard about seed swap groups about eight years ago there were probably just two or three - so the number has gone right up now. And I've got a feeling that now they're established, they're here to stay', says Neil. He adds that the events give gardeners an opportunity to find something unusual. 'Gardeners can get a wider range of things at seed swaps than they can by ordering from catalogues', he explains. 'I think it gives people a chance to learn a bit more about the varieties they're growing because you actually speak to other gardeners. Seed swaps are similar to farmers' markets in that you get a little bit more information, rather than just taking your product to the till and paying for it.'

A recently launched project by charity Garden Organic (which owns the HSL) is encouraging people who grow unusual vegetables, such as Chinese mustard, Shark Fin Melon, chick peas and scotch bonnets, to share their bounty with other gardeners. The campaign is aiming to bring a broader range of vegetables into circulation within communities, and also to ensure varieties that are grown by the elderly are not lost when their owners pass away. And even the most obscure variety is worth saving: the Global Crop Diversity



Trust estimates that a variety of crop is lost every single day. Seed swap groups, although usually small outfits run by volunteers, play a vital role in preserving those that remain.

Unearthing hidden varieties

Claire Rhydwen is one of the organisers of the Dyfi Valley Seed Savers, set up to promote diversity in vegetables. As well as seed swap events, the group is running a campaign to locate any seeds that people have been saving that are not available to buy from supermarkets or seed companies. The drive has prompted donations of vegetable seeds that have been preserved for over 30 years by dedicated gardeners and which they themselves inherited from relatives. 'Diversity is important because at the moment we're almost wholly reliant on what seed companies can produce [often engineered 'hybrid' seeds, producing plants from which seed cannot be saved]', says Claire. 'That's only been the case for the last 40 years or so - prior to that, we used to have lots of different vegetable varieties and almost everyone would save their seeds and select the best ones. If you grow and save your own seeds, over time you select the varieties that you like and develop your own strain that's developed to local conditions.'

The issue becomes particularly important in the context of climate change, Claire explains: 'Preserving diversity means that you have a wide variety of different strains, so if a disease hits a certain variety or changing conditions mean there's a crop failure in one particular variety, the chances are that another variety is likely to survive.' The Dyfi Valley Seed Savers' events are popular, drawing a crowd of several hundred each time, and include activities for children and talks on seed saving. As a result of this year's campaign, the group are growing several new varieties, which will be available to people in the local area. These include the Llanover Pea, a French bean called the Melbourne Mini and two new types of tomato bred by a member of the community.

People behind the seed

Fran Saunders, who helps run Brighton's Seedy Sunday event agrees that seed swaps are a valuable opportunity for gardeners to find something unique while making a difference. The annual events in her city grew out of a shared enthusiasm. 'We're all very passionate about it', Fran says. 'To me, these

varieties are important to our future - and there are some things that taste so good we just shouldn't lose them. Seed swaps also bring people together from all sorts of backgrounds. You can find an old, traditional gardener talking to someone with dreadlocks down to their waist about how to grow a certain type of bean.'

Varieties that Fran has saved include Magpie Dwarf beans (with seeds that are black and cream in colour) and White Tomatoes. She points out that there are still over 12,000 varieties of tomato that many people are not even aware of - from the Green Sausage variety (shaped like a sausage) to the pale yellow Ivory Egg Tomato. According to Director of the Global Crop Diversity Trust, Cary Fowler, seed swaps occasionally even unearth foods believed to be lost forever. 'It doesn't happen very often, but people have discovered varieties thought to be extinct', Cary says. 'It's a very comforting thought to me that some of these rare varieties are being cherished by different families over generations. Hopefully people will continue to cherish them, and we need to have copies of them to help that variety go on.'

Lost diversity

As events like these are community-organised, there is no single reliable source of information for them. Instead, individual groups have set up their own websites or forums, and are usually possible to locate through a quick online search. For those interested in getting involved, there's never been a better time. The role of these groups is particularly important in 2010 - the International Year of Biodiversity, a year when governments are making new biodiversity targets for the future.

Cary says that seed swap groups are not only needed for the knowledge they have built up around certain crops, but also for their ability to raise awareness of the diversity being lost. 'There's a vibrant community in the UK of amateurs, people who love particular crops that they are conserving', Cary says. 'I think it serves a huge public awareness function. You could say plant diversity is one of the most important issues in the world: we're talking about whether agriculture is going to succeed in feeding us or not. But that's not to say policy makers put it anywhere near the top of the agenda. People who have their hands dirty, literally, can really help to educate the rest of the public and potentially policy makers.' 