



Saving Seeds and Saving Culture

Steve Gliessman

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EDITORIAL

Saving Seeds and Saving Culture

I remember sitting in awe outside a thatched hut that was home to the 103-year-old “Keeper of the Seed” named Don Jose as he talked about the corn seed that local farmers entrusted to his keeping between planting seasons. The year was 1977 and I was a young ecologist being introduced to the strong cultural aspects of traditional smallholder farming systems in the lowland tropics of southeastern Mexico in the state of Tabasco. Local seeds were a key component of the incredible biodiversity and strong cultural roots conserved in local Mayan-based agroecosystems such as the traditional corn, beans, and squash intercrop.

Now, almost 40 years later, Don Jose has long since passed and, unfortunately, the seeds and the knowledge he harbored about them might be gone as well. Most of the area where he farmed his entire life is now large monocultures of corn, sugarcane, or pasture. The corn grown in those monocultures is probably seed from uniform modern varieties grown with high inputs of synthetic chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The modernization and globalization of agriculture has had profound impacts on how farmers select and obtain seed, putting at great risk centuries of accumulated knowledge and experience. Probably more threatening, by becoming dependent on a narrow genetic pool of seed that is most often purchased each year rather than saved from the previous crop, farmers suffer further loss of food security and sovereignty.

Fortunately, in recent years, there has been the emergence of a local seed-saving and exchange movement. *ASFS* has recently published research papers on some of these efforts from different parts of the world. One especially promising effort that I would like to call attention to is *Basudba* (“Mother Earth” in Bengali), directed by agroecologist Dr. Debal Deb. Located at a small nonprofit demonstration farm and seed-exchange center in the remote Kerandiguda village of Odisha, India, Dr. Deb grows over 940 varieties of rice seeds that he has collected from small farmers during the last 18 years. In what might be called a “seed ark” he has established and maintained what is probably the last collection of the remaining rice diversity in eastern India. This diversity is only a small fraction of the thousands of traditional varieties that used to be grown, since so many were abandoned before he began *Basuda*. In his collection, which he grows in

small plots every year and then stores the seed in traditional clay pots, are varieties that can withstand changes in temperature and climate, differences in soil nutrients, water stress, salinity, flooding, and diseases, and even have much-valued special aromas.

After being harvested from his plots, some of the seeds are stored for next year's planting, while the rest are used for a free seed-exchange program. He does not charge for the seeds, which he says are a part of the commons and must be shared freely. In order to take seeds, farmers must offer some of their own seed in return. An informal exchange network such as this is the only way to conserve the knowledge in the seed as well as the farmer's knowledge of how to grow it. Since his first collections, Dr. Deb has expanded his seed conservation work to actively promoting the use of local landraces, cross-breeding experiments, and organic farming workshops for farmers. Seeds have become a foundation for his own efforts to bring food justice and fairness back to our food systems. For an insightful story of Dr. Deb's work, visit http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/eij/article/seed_savior/

A seed does not just contain genetic markers, it also comes with what can be considered social and political markers, and is a holder of memory, heritage, and tradition. Rather than relying on what has quickly become a corporate monopoly controlling and promoting a proprietary seed market, putting seeds back into the hands of farmers can help restore the millennial process of local adaptation, selection, and choice. It can also contribute greatly to what has become a global agroecology movement for food sovereignty and food justice.

ASFS will continue to support research that documents the continued emergence of local seed saving and exchange efforts.

Steve Gliessman
Editor