

WHY SOW AND SAVE? BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

WHERE DO OUR FOOD SEEDS COME FROM?

The food plants that nourish us today have evolved over time from wild plants collected by our ancestors long ago. Farmers saved the seed from plants they found tasty and easy to harvest, or those that survived diseases and pests. All the plant-based foods we enjoy on our dinner plates today are there because someone, at some point in history, decided to nurture specific, desirable characteristics in a plant. Through careful observation, experimentation, selection and seed saving, humans created the diversity of food we enjoy today.

WHY PROTECTING OUR SEED BIODIVERSITY IS IMPORTANT

From the dawn of agricultural history (at least 10,000 years ago) to the not so distant past, all seeds were held and managed by the farmers and gardeners who planted them. There was no such thing as a seed company. Every farmer depended on the seeds they and their neighbours saved to plant next year's crop.

Today, fewer independent farmers still grow seeds to sell, and ten companies control half the global seed trade. Increasingly, these seed companies have whittled down the varieties of seeds they offer, shrinking the biodiversity of seeds available to the average gardener or farmer. In addition, these seed companies are increasingly focussed on breeding hybrid or patented seeds that must be bought each year because they are difficult or illegal for people to save. The resulting homogenization and consolidation of our seed supply over the last 100 years has resulted in the loss of 75-90% of our global fruit and vegetable varieties, representing a substantial loss to our collective seed pool.

WHY SAVE SEEDS IN SCHOOL GARDENS?

Many students are made aware of biodiversity through protective measures taken to preserve wild animals, plants or ecosystems. What they might not understand is that most agricultural plant species are also threatened with extinction. This is a new form of biodiversity loss for students to grapple with, but one that is just as important to highlight as the threat of extinction to pandas or polar bears. It is also one that has the potential to be empowering for students: while the average child cannot get directly involved in saving polar bears, all children can save seeds!

Planting and saving seeds with children allows them to:

1. Discover the lifecycle of a plant, from seed to plant to seed;
2. Save unique seed varieties from the threat of extinction;
3. Develop a personal connection to the origins and history of their food and an understanding of our current food system;

4. Convey messages about healthy eating while introducing them to a delicious diversity of foods.

We save seeds in schools not only to protect endangered plant varieties, but to grow children who are engaged in the larger issues around the food they eat. Humans continue to have the ability to shape the way we preserve and grow our diverse food supply, and children should, and CAN, be a part of this!

KEY THEMES TO CONVEY TO STUDENTS

SEED BIODIVERSITY IS IMPORTANT

Did you know?

In the last 100 years North Americans have lost 75-90% of our fruit and vegetable varieties, representing a substantial loss to our collective agricultural gene pool. A shrinking number of crop varieties and lack of diversity in farmers' fields makes us extremely vulnerable to factors such as severe weather, pests and diseases. Increasing the range of crop varieties increases the resilience of our agricultural system.

THE PEOPLE WHO GROW AND SAVE OUR SEEDS ARE IMPORTANT

Did you know?

There are *food* farmers and there are *seed* farmers. Many farmers save seeds from their crops but some grow plants only for their seeds. They save the seeds and share them or sell them to other people who want to grow them. Supporting the work of seed savers and encouraging new ones leads to a more diverse and accessible seed supply.

LOCAL SEED IS IMPORTANT

Did you know?

Many of the seeds planted by farmers in Canada do not come from Canada. For example, we import a large percentage of carrot seeds from Europe, cucumber seeds from the southern U.S., broccoli seeds from Mexico and tomato seeds from Asia. Seeds growing in Mexico face completely different conditions from those being grown in northern Canada. Growing conditions, pests and political situations (e.g. wars or bad agricultural policies) in other countries could put our seed supply at risk. A regionally adapted seed supply means that we use seeds that are best adapted to our local climate and growing conditions and can be easily accessed by Canadian growers.