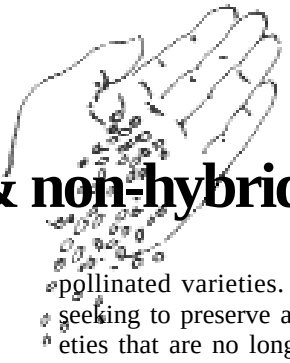
Self sufficiency & non-hybrid seeds



By Reynolds Griffith

There are two basic forms of seeds-hybrid and non-hybrid or open pollinated. Hybrid seeds are created by crossing carefully selected varieties of plants. The plants which grow from hybrid seeds have desirable characteristics from both parents and so are superior to either. Open pollinated seeds are produced by a plant which is pollinated by itself or a plant of the same variety.

Why use non-hybrid seed?

If hybrid seeds produce plants that are "superior", why would we use non-hybrid seeds? First, the term "superior" may be from the viewpoint of the commercial grower, which may not be best for the backyard or homestead gardener. For example, the hybrid crop may ripen all at once or be tough enough to ship across the country. We would prefer it tender and giving us an extended harvest.

Also, we cannot save the seeds from a hybrid plant and plant them the next year. (Actually, we could plant them, but there's no telling what would grow—almost certainly not anything as good as the parent plant.)

Seeds from a non-hybrid plant generally grow into plants almost identical to the plant which produced the seed. By saving seed from our gardens to plant the next year, we reduce our reliance on commercial sources. By careful selection of the plants from which to save seed we also end up with varieties which do well in our particular location.

Sources of non-hybrid seed

Most commercial seed dealers have non-hybrid as well as hybrid seeds. Hybrids must be indicated in the name or description in the catalog so it is easy to avoid them. However, there are suppliers who specialize in open pollinated varieties. These often are seeking to preserve and develop varieties that are no longer being carried in the major catalogs. By ordering from them instead of the big commercial dealers, we encourage the preservation of a wide range of varieties that are particularly suited for home gardeners. Here are some of the specialized sources:

Bountiful Gardens, c/o Ecology Action, 5798 Ridgewood Road, Willits, CA 95490. Their stock includes herbs and cover crops as well as vegetables. The catalog has very good descriptions. They also carry books and other materials on the biointensive gardening method. The catalog is free.

Garden City Seeds, 625 Phillips, Missoula, MT 59802. It carries vegetable seeds for northern climates.

Native Seeds/SEARCH, 2509 N. Campbell Ave., #325 Tucson, AZ 85719. They specialize in rediscovering, propagating, and distributing seeds of plants native to the Southwest. The catalog cost is $1.00.

Redwood City Seed Company, P.O. Box 361, Redwood City, CA 94064. They offer a variety of unusual vegetables, fruits, nuts, and herbs with interesting background on them. The catalog costs $1.00.

Seed Savers Exchange, R.R. 3, Box 239, Decorah, IA 52101. Not a seed company, but puts gardeners who save heirloom vegetable seeds in touch with each other. Send a long stamped addressed envelope for information.

Seeds Blum, Idaho City Stage, Boise, Idaho 83706. Their catalog has many heirlooms and unusual vegetables with good descriptions, suggestions for planting, gardening tips, and information on seed saving. It is arranged by a botanical family to help seed savers avoid unintended crossing of varieties. Catalog costs $3.

Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, P.O. Box 158, North Garden, VA 22959. Another good one—their catalog has very detailed descriptions, planting instructions, etc. Mostly open pollinated heirloom varieties. Many varieties are especially for the climates of the Mid-Atlantic region, but some are more widely adapted. It also carries some books. Catalog costs $3.

Territorial Seed Co., P.O. Box 157, Cottage Grove, OR 97424. They carry seeds primarily for the Pacific Northwest and similar climates. The catalog is free.

Saving seeds

To save seed, we select a couple of plants that seem to be doing especially well and let them "go to seed." For some (e.g. lettuce) this means not harvesting them so that they mature and produce seed (some will take until the next year to do so). For others (e.g. okra or squash) it means leaving a fruit or two on plants to fully ripen (or dry out in cases like beans or okra).'

You should save at least twice as much seed as you expect to want to plant the next year. That way, if your crop should fail next time, you will still have seed to plant the year after (and perhaps some to share with others). Seeds of most plants will last at least two or three years if properly stored.

Be sure the seeds are completely dry before you store them (allow at least a week). Put them in airtight containers (e.g. vitamin bottles). Label each bottle with the variety and year.

Store them in a cool location where varmints can't get to them. Also save any catalog description or planting instructions that you have for each variety.

Conclusion

Using non-hybrid seeds makes sense for the homesteader or home gardener. It can be fun to try out several more of the many available varieties each year and develop your own seed stock of your favorites.

Sources for additional information: Bubel, Nancy, *The Seed-Starters Handbook*, (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press), 1978. Δ