

Workshop Title: Growing Organic Seed as a Specialty Crop

Speaker & their title: Lorna McMaster, Pembroke Farm

Executive Summary:

Lorna and her partner started out farming a small mixed farm and gradually evolved into seed saving. They are now located on PEI. She emphasized the fact that saving seeds provides the farmer with control over fluctuations in availability and can eventually result in seed varieties that are well-adapted to conditions where they are grown. She highlighted seed saving practises for several vegetables with special emphasis on corn.

Squash

- Lorna underlined the importance of knowing your squashes. There are three basic types.
- Pepos - pumpkins, summer squash, delicata
- Mochatas- butternuts
- Maximas

With squash seed pick the fat ones for saving; be very selective.

Quality control is very important. Sometimes the seeds/plants that survive will pay dividends in the future.

Kale

Keep cutting kale back until plants goes to seed. Often plants are cross-pollinated and the result will provide a blend of varieties. Cleaning seed is an issue but you don't have to have it perfectly clean for your purposes.

Beans

- Plant beans, weed once and then good luck is Lorna's approach.
- On their farm all beans are hand harvested. Succession planting is practised early in the season so different varieties and planting times can be examined to see how well they do. Seeds from later plantings of well performing varieties can then be saved in quantity.
- Early picked beans can reduce length of time to harvest. Selection and control is important.
- Stomping technique (using your feet to break open the bean pods) works very well as a harvesting approach. Use a tarp or a large bucket for this process then winnow in the wind.

Corn

Lorna has done a lot of saving and selecting of corn seed. This has resulted in some interesting regional adaptations. She has mixed painted mountain corn and hopi corn and produced longer cobs and variation in colours. So genetic modifications produce some interesting varieties. They have been able to select for characteristics they want.

Harvesting corn, curing and storage:

- Lorna suggests grabbing the top, stripping the husk off and then snap the cob off at the bottom.
- Their corn is dried on racks in a shed.
- By chance they discovered that wool worked as a great absorber of moisture in the drying process. Wool was hung about the drying shed and absorbed moisture from the corn. The

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Halifax Harbourfront Marriott Hotel, NS**

wool was then dried outside. Fans and a dehumidifier are also used to assist in the drying process for their seeds.

Lorna mentioned that carrots are one plant that she does not try to save. Because of potential crossing with Queen Anne's Lace she does not work with carrots. She encouraged participants to try different plants - rainbow chard, radishes, asparagus, etc.

Lorna mentioned that in some other countries seed saving is supported actively by the state.

Q and A

- Q. How do you ensure genetic variation?
- A. By ensuring that a large number of cobs are collected to maintain diversity.

- Q. Have you noticed kale varieties crossing with one another?
- A. Yes but after the initial cross we have seen the variety become very well adapted to the conditions on our farm.

- Q. How did you overwinter plants that needed to do that?
- A. We did nothing special. We just took the plants that survived. All Lorna does is select seed. There is no cross breeding. One must be consistent in the selections that one makes.

- Q. Was the squash you selected a maxima?
- A. Yes, we selected it by a tasting test.

- Q. Can you say more about the stomping?
- A. I recommend a soft soled shoe. Make sure that the beans are perfectly dry before you save them or put them into storage.

- Q. What about distances between plants?
- A. Different plants require different distances between them so that cross-pollination is avoided. Check online for details or other written resources.

- Q. Do you have a market for your seeds?
- A. We only have a small one. The value for us is the control of the seed and its adaptability.