

# Sourcing Our Seeds

**Belle Starr & Bill McDorman**

One of the best things about winter is opening up a new seed catalog and poring over the array of beautiful offerings and photos. Perusing the catalogs not only offers hope for a warmer, more delicious and inviting future but can be an adventure in seed education as well.

Many of us put organic at the top of our list of important considerations when purchasing seeds, but do we think about where those seeds are being grown and how they get to the seed companies? The term organic now has a pretty complicated set of standards associated with it and can only be applied by farmers and producers who are certified through an independent agency approved by the USDA. The National Organic Program (NOP) has a 5% tolerance level for pesticide residues detected in organic produce. No GMO residues are allowed in food or seed production; however, no federal agency, including the EPA or USDA, has established tolerance levels for the inadvertent presence of GMOs so it is an ambiguous rule at best. Organic farmers are required to source organic seeds for their crops if they can be found. If not, non-treated, non-GMO seed is acceptable.

Organic food and seeds are still our best protection against the toxic chemicals of industrial agriculture. As demand for organic food increases, the scale of organic production increases as well. While organic products continue to skyrocket in popularity and sales (some \$35.1 billion in 2013 representing a 12% increase from 2012, according to Time Magazine), the big question is: where will farmers get their seeds? Therein lies the rub. Although there are nonprofit organizations working on larger scale organic seed production, it is the “corporate” seed producers who are scaling up to supply the burgeoning organic marketplace.

Our seeds often come from thousands of miles away, produced by large agrichemical corporations like Seminis and Bejo. Many old-time favorite seed companies may still grow some seed, but

they predominantly source from other places. Put in the position of trying to keep up with the demand, many have been successful at growing into multi-million dollar operations, sourcing from large corporate entities.

Recently we met a small organic seed grower (operating on 300 acres) whose contract was terminated with one of these “favorite” seed catalog companies after many years because he can’t provide the volume now needed by that growing enterprise. The catalog seed company is going elsewhere.

You may notice a category in catalogs called “Plant Variety Protected (PVP).” Growers may save the seed, but they cannot share or sell it. This isn’t a new category for seed companies, but it is being highlighted more because of the growing revival of seed saving. Remarkably, PVP seeds may also be labeled as organic.

Another category worth noting is hybrid organic seed. Although not impossible to save, it takes more know-how and usually requires up to eight growing seasons to “stabilize” a line. Hybrid seed is the first-generation

Rocky Mountain Seed Alliance (RMSA) is a grassroots network committed to securing an abundant and diverse supply of seeds for the Rocky Mountain region through education, collaboration, and community-based models of seed stewardship. Since its inception in May of 2014, founders Bill McDormand & Belle Starr have traveled over 7,000 miles throughout the Rocky Mountains networking and teaching in their flagship educational program: Seed School. More Seed School programs are planned for 2015 including an on-line, seven-week series beginning in January ([www.rockymountainseeds.org](http://www.rockymountainseeds.org)). RMSA wants to connect with existing seed savers and inspire all gardeners and farmers to join the ancient tradition of seed stewardship.

offspring (F1) from two distinctly different parents. To get the same quality crop, gardeners must purchase fresh seed every year.

Thinking in terms of “seed-sheds” should be as much of a priority as foodsheds, watersheds, and other ways we define our bioregions. Sourcing seeds locally has great benefit and the importance of growing local seeds cannot be overemphasized. As with our food, when we buy seeds we are supporting a whole agricultural system—organic or not.

Ultimately, the real scrutiny comes when we can look into the eyes of our farmers, get to know them, and learn about their growing practices; are they sustainable, certified organic, beyond organic? Another question now needs to be asked: “Where do you get your seeds?”

A new movement is underway to



Seed School at Onsen Farm in southern Idaho in November 2014, with Bill McDormand at left front. Such a happy group! Maybe it's the natural hot springs there.

strengthen regional seed diversity and production. Truly local seed companies are working toward creating cooperatives to provide stock seed, in addition to sourcing elsewhere. Farmers are beginning to recognize the value of

producing their own seed as they take the best of the current season’s harvest into next year’s crop production.

Seed libraries are a rising trend nationwide, now several hundred strong and often housed within public libraries. This is an inspiring movement and a path to true sustainability—locally adapted seeds, collectively cultivated and freely exchanged.

Bringing production back to “small and local” allows us to focus on ecological niches. What is implied is that the smaller we make our agriculture, the better it will be for creating a sustainable model that can help revitalize local diversity—especially where seeds are concerned.

Four companies (Monsanto, Dupont, Syngenta, and Bayer) now own and control 78% of the world’s seeds. They dominate the world’s food production and the industrial agriculture that fuels it.

The good news is that, in terms of producing their own seed, home gardeners and small farmers are still mostly off the radar. Seeds purchased for smaller scale operations and hobbyists are not genetically modified.

(That doesn’t mean that we won’t find some genetic drift from an already GMO-dominated marketplace.)

In January 2014, Wired Magazine reported on Monsanto’s new foray into traditional, non-GMO vegetable seed production. One would assume they have their eye on the organic market as well.

How this plays out, and what communities decide to do to overcome these challenges, is still up for grabs. It may seem complicated, but the answer might be as simple as creating a regional seed solution model where farmers and seed producers collaborate to provide stock seed. Thankfully, there are tremendous resources available and great groups working on these solutions. Rocky Mountain Seed Alliance (RMSA) is proud to be part of this flowering movement.

Siskiyou Seeds of Williams, OR ([www.siskiyouseeds.com](http://www.siskiyouseeds.com)) is a great example of a bio-regional seed company growing locally adapted seeds, and breeding their own for the distinct characteristics that work well in the Pacific North West. When they need other seed or to fill out their offerings, they list the companies supplying that seed and are completely transparent. Hats off to Don Tipping and his team!

Bill McDormand and Belle Starr are co-founders of the Rocky Mountain Seed Alliance. Previously, they were the director & deputy director of Native Seeds/SEARCH in Tucson, AZ, a 32 year-old seed conservation organization. Bill founded 3 seed companies including High Altitude Gardens and co-founded several non-profits including the Sawtooth Botanical Garden in Hailey, Idaho. Together they developed Seed School, now in its 5th year, which has graduated 600 people from around the world.

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