

# Network aims to link plant breeders, chefs



Oregon State University researcher Lane Selman, an agricultural researcher at Oregon State University, has established a network that allows breeders to talk directly with users to develop vegetable varieties that best suit their needs.

By MARGARETT WATERBURY  
For the Capital Press

Oregon State University agricultural researcher Lane Selman wants to see more chefs and produce buyers step out of the kitchen and onto the farm.

During the course of her career, Selman observed that seed breeders' decisions directly impact growers, marketers and buyers. Yet few of those downstream stakeholders knew about current breeding projects, and fewer still understood the enormous impact seed breeding has on the landscape of the agricultural and food system.

Would connecting breed-

ers with downstream crop consumers result in better, more useful plant breeding projects? she wondered.

She held a tasting event in Portland, and invited several local chefs to evaluate sweet peppers from a current variety trial in fresh, roasted and sautéed form.

Not only did they provide excellent flavor feedback, they volunteered important information previously not considered in the project.

For example, peppers with a sunken stem yield more waste than smooth-shouldered peppers. Crinkled peppers are harder to de-seed and process.

Their input guided the de-

velopment of a new open-pollinated variety called Stocky Red Roaster from Wild Garden Seed in Philomath, Ore.

Selman has spent the last three years scaling that strategy. She formed an organization called the Culinary Breeding Network with the mission of creating stronger links between plant breeders and the consumers who depend on them. The organization focuses on breeding open-pollinated varieties for organic systems, but Selman says the benefits extend well beyond the organic market.

"When we say, 'varieties bred for organic systems,' it just means they're able to perform well without a lot of in-

puts, and that saves money for conventional farmers. Conventional farmers are impacted by hybrid churn, too. More resilience, better flavor, these are things all farmers want," Selman says.

Another benefit of the project has been an increased interest in, and understanding of, plant breeding among the public. Selman says, "When I went to the North American Plant Breeders' Association meeting last year, they talked a lot about how important it is to engage and educate the general public about plant breeding and the misconceptions behind it. What's GE? What's a hybrid? The CBN has become very friendly way

to put plant breeding on the general public's radar."

One of the ways the CBN has reached out to the public is through its annual Variety Showcase. The showcase pairs seed breeders with one or more chefs who prepare dishes that showcase current breeding projects. Held in Portland, the event sells out each year, and has attracted national sponsorship.

Moving forward, Selman hopes to expand her model to other regions of the United States. Organizations in Wisconsin, New York and Maine have all expressed interest in replicating the Culinary Breeding Network's strategy.

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