

SEEDS FOR WHERE WE LIVE

Independent seed growers keep plant diversity alive

A search for escarole seed late last summer led me to the excellent website of Adaptive Seeds (adaptiveseeds.com). The seed they sent so promptly (for escarole “Diva” and a locally bred fava bean, “Aprovecho”) was terrific, delivering uniform, vigorous germination at a rate close to 100 percent. “Diva” has proved exceptionally cold-hardy, and the beans are growing strong.

This relatively young, farm-based company near Sweet Home is owned and operated by Sarah Kleeger and Andrew Still, with General Manager Jo Erikson. Kleeger and Still are founder members of the Seed Ambassadors Project, a small group of Oregon-based seed stewards who are committed to increasing the diversity of vegetable varieties appropriate for the Pacific Northwest and making them available to others. The pair traveled all over Europe and Asia a few years back in search of likely varieties to work with.

With so much of the world’s seed production locked up by a handful of global corporations, vegetable diversity is shrinking. We desperately need independent companies like Adaptive Seeds. None of their listings are patented, GMO or proprietary hybrids, and 85 percent are Certified Organic. They are either grown on the premises or grown for Adaptive Seeds by a network of small, local farmers. All varieties are open-pollinated, so you can save your own seed. Adaptive Seeds has signed on to the Open Source Seed Initiative (OSSI). Check out this vital new initiative (already noticed by Monsanto, who dubbed it a “movement”) at osseeds.org.

I recently quizzed Kleeger, by email, about their business.

Why should people buy seed from small companies like Adaptive Seeds?

Most conventional seed is produced on a very large scale. When seed is grown on a scale of many, many acres the relationship between the grower and the crop cannot be very deep. Farmers just can’t do selection work on that scale. The farm we lease has about 10 farmable acres and at this point we’re growing on about 4 acres per year. That scale enables us to pay close attention to the crops we grow, so we can do more selection to maintain and improve varieties.



ANDREW STILL AND SARAH KLEEGER

Crops for seed are in the ground much longer than crops for consumption, so they are more exposed to pest and disease pressures, requiring huge inputs of pesticides

and herbicides. In contrast, small seed growers like us and other small, local seed companies (such as Green Journey Seeds, Peace Seedlings, Wild Garden Seeds, Siskiyou Seeds) use only organic methods, which is better for everyone — especially pollinators! All of our seed is grown without chemical fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides, and *none* of it is treated.

Buying locally grown, open-pollinated seed from local seed companies, you know you are getting seed that has been selected to do well in the place where you live. With each generation our seeds become more adapted to conditions here in the Pacific Northwest.

How do gardeners benefit from your introductions?

Our website now has over 170 varieties that are noted as Seed Ambassadors Project introductions, many from our overseas trips. Another dozen or so are Adaptive Seeds originals from our own breeding work. Buying from us, gardeners get access to a diversity that would be very hard to access anywhere else.

What are your most important finds from those trips?

Probably the diversity of kales we brought back with us. It’s been said that kale is the totem vegetable of the Pacific Northwest, but before our trip only three open-pollinated varieties were available: red Russian, lacinato, and the occasional Siberian. We wanted to find more interesting varieties of oleracea-type kales from their area of origin (Europe). We wound up finding too many varieties to keep separate, so Nick Routledge crossed 17 of them together. We grew this mix out and sell it as the Kale Coalition. A few varieties that went into that mix also appear in the catalog as separate items. Another stand-out acquisition is a great selection of sweet and hot peppers, mostly Hungarian varieties we picked up in Romania.

Last question: Why all the amaranth in your catalog?

Amaranth is a really great and versatile crop. It’s very productive in a small space and easy to process with no special equipment. Also it’s a good alternative for people with gluten sensitivities. We offer 10 varieties this year, some of which are gorgeous ornamentals for borders or cut flowers like the classic love-lies-bleeding, some that are delicious as warm-weather salad and/or braising green — amaranth loves the heat and grows well when most go-to greens get hit hard by pests — and some that are best for grain production. Most varieties are good for two out of the three uses. We find all of them to be quite beautiful. ■

Rachel Foster lives and gardens in Eugene. She can be reached at rfoster@efn.org.

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