

# FREE THE SEEDS

AVOID CORPORATE SEEDS BY SEEKING OUT SMALL SEED PRODUCERS BY RACHEL FOSTER

**A** huge proportion of seed production in the U.S. (80 percent-plus) and around the world (40 percent-plus) is controlled by a handful of corporations such as Monsanto and DuPont. Should you care? That depends. Do you like to save your own vegetable seed? How do you feel about giant monopolies, genetic engineering and the idea of plants as intellectual property?

Monsanto and DuPont are, of course, the main players developing GMO (genetically modified organism) varieties. GMOs are not really an issue for home gardeners, at least so far: Only a couple of GMO vegetable varieties exist for home and small-farm growers. And virtually all the catalogs that arrive in my mailbox have signed the Safe Seed Pledge, which means no GMOs.

But maybe you'd rather have nothing to do with Monsanto or any of its subsidiaries? Since Monsanto is mostly interested in seeds for Big Ag, it has not as yet swallowed up small seed companies that largely cater to home gardeners and small farmers.

Monsanto does, however, own Seminis Seeds, a huge supplier of vegetable seed. A decade ago, most seed companies distributed many varieties of Seminis seeds, including popular varieties they had sold for years before Monsanto purchased Seminis in 2005. This included well-loved companies like Johnny's, Fedco Seeds and Territorial Seed Company, all of which have since phased out their Seminis offerings. That's why you no longer find Packman broccoli in their catalogs.

Once a corporation controls a variety, it is free to slap a patent on it. Plant patents seeking to prohibit unlicensed propagation are concerned only with varieties that are reproduced asexually, like rhubarb and berries. But there is something called a utility patent that can be applied to a seed variety or a particular trait and has the same effect: The seed is sold for crop production only and prohibits saving or selling seed.

There are no exemptions for farmers to save seed and none for research or breeding. Utility patents are replacing older PVPs (Plant Variety Protection), which permitted growers to save seed for their own use.

Seed catalogs attach a lot of symbols to their listings. Let's look at two big ones. Varieties marked OP are "open pollinated" varieties. You can save seed from these with the expectation that the offspring will, with some small variation, resemble their parents. (That variation allows you, by selecting seed plants carefully, to refine the variety for your own conditions and preferences.)

Not so with F1 hybrids. An F1 (such as Packman broccoli) is the first-generation offspring of two disparate parents. If it sets seeds at all, they won't come true: That is, they won't resemble the F1 parents you purchased. *You have to buy new ones every year.*

Consolidation of businesses like Seminis Seeds under corporate ownership leads to the loss of many valuable varieties. Fear among small-ag growers that veg and fruit diversity could be seriously compromised in the future has led to a proliferation of small seed producers that are dedicated to preserving a diversity of edibles. Most of their seed is open pollinated and regionally appropriate, and much of it is grown organically. (Check out "Seeds for Where We Live," *Eugene Weekly*, Feb. 11, 2016.)

Far from attempting to restrict seed saving, these businesses encourage it. What's more, some are joining a nationwide effort to protect new varieties from any restriction on their use and distribution. The Open Source Seed Initiative, or OSSI, is modeled on open-source computer software. Seed of OSSI-pledged varieties may be sold or given away, but the transaction comes with the OSSI pledge: "You have the freedom to use these OSSI-Pledged seeds in any way you choose. In return, you pledge not to restrict others' use of these seeds or their derivatives by patents or other means, and to include this pledge with any transfer of these seeds or their derivatives." Take a look at the OSSI website: [osseeds.org](http://osseeds.org).

Thirty plant breeders and 35 seed companies have signed on to OSSI, and there are more than 250 OSSI-pledged varieties. Carol Deppe, Corvallis plant breeder and author of *The Tao of Vegetable Gardening*, owns Fertile Valley Seeds and serves on OSSI's board of directors. She has pledged all her own varieties of corn, squash and beans.

Deppe proudly informed me that Oregon is a hotbed of OSSI activity, with more breeders and OSSI seed company partners than any other state. Frank Morton of Wild Garden Seed in Philomath has OSSI-pledged his entire oeuvre of more than 150 original varieties. Four more Oregon breeders and nine Oregon seed companies have signed on as OSSI partners.

FedCo Seeds, a California company popular with Oregon gardeners, also signed on to OSSI. Oregon's Territorial Seed Company, Deppe told me, declined to do so. However, Tom Johns of Territorial told *EW* the OSSI pledge is a "brand new thing," and it would be more accurate to say the seed company "has not yet signed." ■



# 4 THE

YOUR DONATIONS MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Thank You!

## Goodwill Donation Locations

Your donations change lives.

<p><b>CRESWELL</b> 230 East Oregon Avenue</p>	<p><b>EUGENE</b> 4925 Barger Road 2823 Chad Drive 1643 Coburg Road 685 E. Broadway</p>	<p><b>JUNCTION CITY</b> 1495 Ivy Street</p>
<p><b>COTTAGE GROVE</b> 1250 Hwy 99</p>	<p>1010 Green Acres Road 855 Seneca Road 1717 W. 18th 75 W. Division Avenue</p>	<p><b>SPRINGFIELD</b> 102 30th Street 5810 Main Street 514 Q Street</p>

Our Mission: To provide vocational opportunities to individuals with barriers to employment

## BRING's Second Annual Earth Day Birthday Party

### Giving Back to the Planet

Saturday,  
April 23, 2016  
11 a.m. - 4 p.m.  
4446 Franklin  
Glenwood

We're turning 45!

Join us for an Earth Day event  
co-sponsored by Mountain Rose Herbs  
**SALE: 45% off most used merchandise**

2016 EWEB Greenpower Grant announcement • Activities • Workshops • Repair2Reuse Café for bicycles • Information Sharing • Live Music • Food Cart

FEATURING:

EWEB • the City of Eugene • the City of Springfield • LRAPA • LTD • SquareOne Villages • the Science Factory • NextStep Recycling • Arcimoto • Patchwork Repair • BEST • The Turning Point Center • and others.

Ride your bike or the bus to the party and receive a 25% off coupon from **BRING**.  
Download free LTD transit passes for the event online at [bringrecycling.org](http://bringrecycling.org)