



SAVING SEEDS

By Maggie Agro

If you think the fruit and vegetables you eat today just don't taste as good as those you ate when you were a kid, you're probably right.

Since 1960, the range of crop varieties available to and grown by farmers has steadily decreased. Only three percent of the varieties of fruits and vegetables cultivated for food in 1900 are still around today.

Genetic diversity, the multiple strains or varieties of a food crop, is nature's way of providing that no one individual carries all of the traits of a particular species. This insures that species will be able to change and adapt to new environments, new pests and changing climates. When our crops become less diverse, they become more susceptible to pests and diseases and our food supply becomes more vulnerable.

Take, for example, the Irish potato famine, caused by a blight, which destroyed the particular strain of potatoes grown in Ireland. By introducing a new strain from Peru, not susceptible to the blight, the food supply was gradually restored and the famine ended.

In New Mexico, Seeds of Change, founded in 1989, is growing plants, collecting and trading seeds with organic growers from around the world. They are saving many plants from extinction and are working to produce new, nutrient rich strains.



Using the same techniques as an organic home gardener, they enrich the soil with compost and use natural mulches to keep in moisture; they observe moisture and sun/shade patterns to make the best use of growing conditions. Then they let their plants go to seed and take careful steps to preserve the seed they harvest.

You can help preserve diversity by selecting the best species to grow for your area. Choose heirloom or heritage varieties when possible. Try to reduce the need for purchasing seed by saving seed from all that you grow or buy. By planting the seed that you save, you become a gentle observer of nature's rhythms. You learn to "read" your plants and their environment.

If you want to start with something easy, try beans or peas. Make it a fun project. Next year when you plant them, you will probably find them a choice spot, give them a little more attention, and get much more satisfaction from growing them. And they will probably taste better. You will find that your level of satisfaction grows with your involvement.

Try saving early-bearing plants to encourage that trait. Mark your seed-saving plants with a ribbon or tie so that they are not accidentally harvested. Keep only the seeds from plants that have done well in your garden and those that are most resistant to insects. Always keep more than you need because it's not unusual to find that only half of most home-saved seeds will grow.

Most seeds will dry adequately if spread on a paper towel for a week. Turn seeds and replace paper if necessary. Large seeds take longer. You can store seed in baby food jars or margarine tubs but be sure to label all containers with seed name, and year harvested. Seeds stored in paper will absorb moisture from the air and dry out as moisture changes. These changes will gradually destroy the viability of the seed.