

Saving Seed: an Introduction to Seed Sovereignty

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY INITIATIVE

What is Seed Sovereignty?

Seed sovereignty is the right that farmers have to save, use, breed, exchange, and sell open source seeds.

Open source seeds are seeds that are not genetically modified, patented, or owned or controlled by corporations. These seeds grow into plants that will continue to produce viable seeds (which isn't true of all genetically modified varieties).

Seed sovereignty is an essential part of food sovereignty, which is the right of individuals, communities, and countries to determine their own food and agriculture policies that establish food security by producing food that is culturally appropriate and healthy, using environmentally sustainable and socially equitable practices.

Seed Sovereignty is an Essential Component of Food Sovereignty

Without access to high-quality seeds and the ability to save, use, breed, and share seeds freely, true food sovereignty is unattainable.

Open source seeds are the key to a food system with biodiverse food crops. Biodiversity builds resiliency into the food system and is essential in strengthening food production to withstand the effects of climate change.

Seeds Hold Cultural Knowledge

Indigenous peoples have been breeding plants and stewarding seeds for thousands of years.

On Turtle Island, one of the more notable examples of seed stewardship is the development and spread of *Zea mays*, also known as maize, or corn. Maize began as teosinte, a wild grass that still exists to this day.

Over thousands of years, the wild ancestors of corn were cultivated and bred by Indigenous groups in what is now known as central Mexico. Along with squash and beans, the other plants that make up the three sisters, the seeds were passed along trade routes and made their way northward over generations, thousands of years before colonizers arrived on the continent.

Indigenous Seed Sovereignty Today

According to NAFSA (the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance, which houses the Indigenous SeedKeepers' Network, or ISKN),

“Seeds are a vibrant and vital foundation for food sovereignty, and are the basis for a sustainable, healthy agriculture. We understand that seeds are our precious collective inheritance and it is our responsibility to care for the seeds as part of our responsibility to feed and nourish ourselves and future generations.”

The ISKN was founded in 2016 by Rowen White, a Seedkeeper from the Mohawk community of Akwesasne. The network works with tribal communities & non-profits to revitalize traditional foodways, Indigenous cultural knowledge, and Native food systems.

“In honor of the grand lineage of Seedkeepers who have faithfully passed down seeds for our nourishment, we make restored commitment to care for these precious seeds for those yet to come:

“Sacred or Divine Sovereignty- Food is a gift from the Creator; in this respect the right to food is sacred and cannot be constrained or recalled by colonial laws, policies and institutions. Indigenous food sovereignty is fundamentally achieved by upholding our sacred responsibility to nurture healthy, interdependent relationships with the land, plants and animals that provide us with our food.”

Indigenous Food Sovereignty Network



Threats to Seed Sovereignty

Over the last 100 years, the industrialization of the food system, including the development of hybrid seed types, genetic crop modification, seed patents, and global trade agreements, have all contributed to the loss of seed sovereignty and biodiversity in seed crops.

Biopiracy refers to the practice of large, multinational corporations taking seeds from traditional food plants without the consent of local communities and then patenting them as intellectual property. These patents then legally prohibit anyone, including the indigenous people whose ancestors cultivated those same seeds, from saving seeds..

The ISKN and other organizations work to remedy access to seeds by rematriating seeds to the Indigenous groups whose ancestors originally cultivated them. One way you can help protect seed sovereignty is by learning how to save seeds and connecting with your local seed library or seed bank.

Seed Banks & Seed Libraries

A seed bank stores seeds at low temperatures with low moisture content in order to preserve genetic biodiversity for the long term. Seed banks help protect the future food supply in case food crops are destroyed by climate change or other types of disasters. Seed banks are usually publically funded, and their living collections are a type of seed library.

A seed library lends seeds to gardeners, usually with the expectation that gardeners will return one to two times the amount of seeds that they received. This way, the seed library will continue to grow, preserving genetic biodiversity for the long term and allowing seeds to adapt to a local microclimate.

How You Can Help: Seed Saving & Seed Stewardship

You can help preserve genetic biodiversity in food crops by becoming a seed saver and connecting with local seedkeepers or a local seedkeeping network. Your local seed library or food sovereignty organization is a great place to look for seed saving resources.

Here at Sicangu CDC, we've been saving seeds for the past few years. We started saving seeds for our future tribal seed bank & community seed libraries in 2020. Right now, we're reaching out to local gardeners for help growing out heirloom varieties to grow our collection.

For more information about gardening, food sovereignty, and seed saving, check out our Planting Guides on our website www.sicangucdc.org/food-resources.

Sources

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