

Seeds from the Past Protect Our Food Future

In 1845 the Irish potato crop succumbed to a new type of blight, resulting in widespread famine and death. In the 1970s U.S. corn farmers suffered severe crop losses because 80 percent of their corn acres used the same parent line. In both cases, experts agree that greater genetic diversity would have prevented disaster.

The Seed Savers Exchange based in Decorah, one of the oldest organizations devoted to collecting and maintaining genetic diversity in crops, seeks to prevent such catastrophes. Founded in 1975, the Exchange includes more than 10,000 people worldwide who offer nearly 20,000 varieties of seeds for exchange, reports David Cavagnaro, an Exchange board member. “We have the largest seed catalog in the world,” he says.

“Family heirloom seeds came to this country from Europe as early as the Pilgrims. Others came as recently as the Southeast Asian boat people,” says Cavagnaro. Other seeds were acquired on recent collecting trips through Central Asia and Romania and through trades with international seed banks in East Germany and Russia.

“Modern changes in agriculture and demographics have dramatically reduced the genetic diversity of our food supply, both in commerce and in home gardens,” explains Cavagnaro. “This represents not only a loss culturally, but it also poses a grave threat to our food supply by eliminating much of the diversity that sustains genetic health and adaptability. Seed-saving ventures contribute to preserving what precious food diversity remains.” — C.B.

Learn more: www.seedsavers.org

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