

# Market Opportunities for Culturally Meaningful Seed and Food

2023-24 Stakeholder Summary Report – **Ujamaa Cooperative Farming Alliance Grower Supplement**

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## OVERVIEW

This document contains supplemental material to the 2023-24 Stakeholder Summary Report, which outlines the bulk of the findings from the project entitled “Culturally Meaningful, Regionally Adapted Seed: Making the Ujamaa Cooperative Farmers Alliance Market Ready.” This project, conducted between 2021 and 2024, was a collaborative project between the Ujamaa Cooperative Farming Alliance (UCFA) and the University of Vermont (UVM). This supplementary report draws on the same data sources of the broader report, though with a more refined lens: we focus specifically on the sub-sample of respondents of the survey who are already affiliated with UCFA, are growing seed for UCFA’s catalog, or plan to in the future (n=382), as well as include qualitative insights exclusively from a focus group conducted with four UCFA growers<sup>1</sup>.



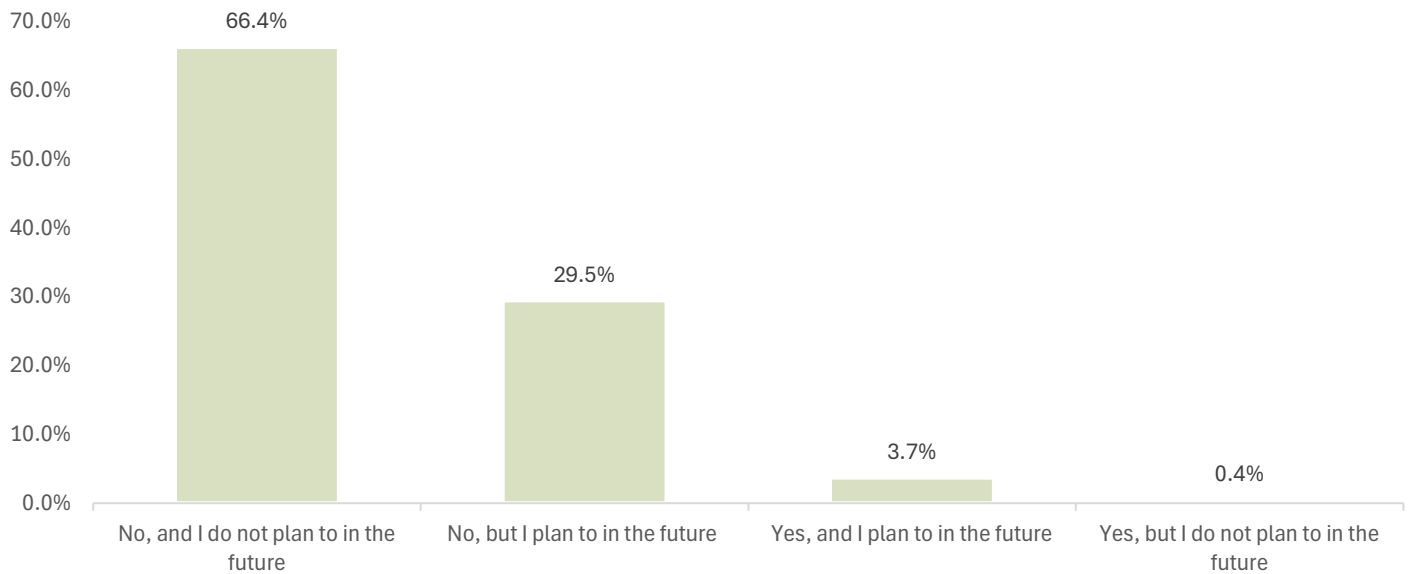
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<sup>1</sup> For comparability, there are important differences between the demographics of the overall survey versus the sub-sample of UCFA or potential-UCFA grower respondents of the survey. Namely, while 77% of the overall survey identified themselves as white and non-Latinx, 69% of those included in this supplemental report are white, with about 32% of respondents being Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC). This corresponds to the fact that 38% of respondents of this sub-sample reported their heritage as being from a non-European country and/or a mix of European heritage *and* another continent. For the focus group of UCFA growers, 3 out of the 4 participants were women of color.

For all other demographics (including age, gender, income, and education), sub-sample demographics closely follow those in the main report.

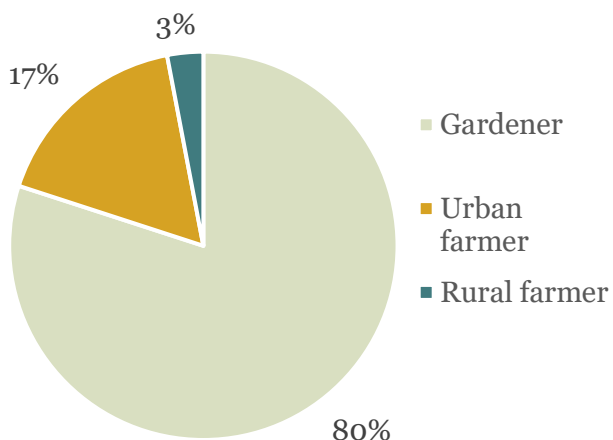
## CHARACTERIZATION OF UCFA CURRENT AND POTENTIAL GROWERS

Among those who indicated they are a farmer or gardener (n=1428) across the entire sample, 3% of respondents reported that they are currently affiliated with UCFA (n=43). Knowing that UCFA's membership is much higher than 43 individuals, these findings in this supplementary report should be interpreted carefully as they represent just a fraction of UCFA's growers. That being said, nearly 30% of farmers and gardeners surveyed across the entire survey (n=1136) indicated that while they might not currently grow seed for UCFA, they plan to in the future (Figure 1). Ample opportunity thus seems to exist for UCFA to expand its membership, with this survey showing a relatively high degree of grower interest in UCFA.



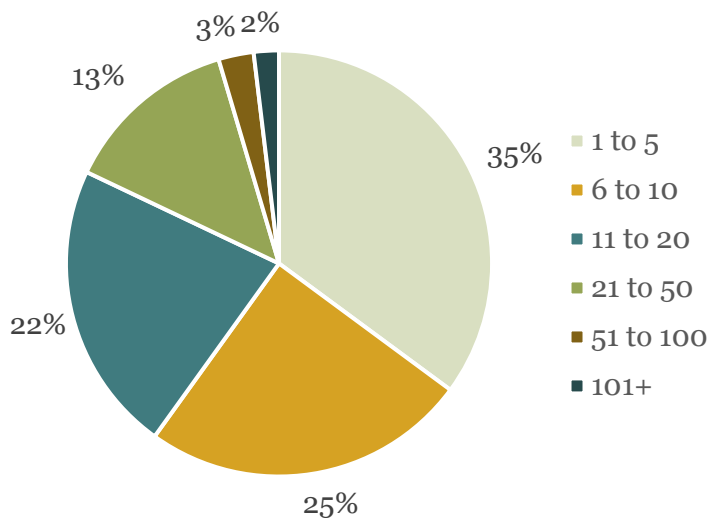
**Figure 1.** Have you grown seed for Ujamaa in the past? (n=1136)

\*Note: the sample size for this question is larger than for other questions reported in this supplemental report due to being pulled from the entire sampling frame.

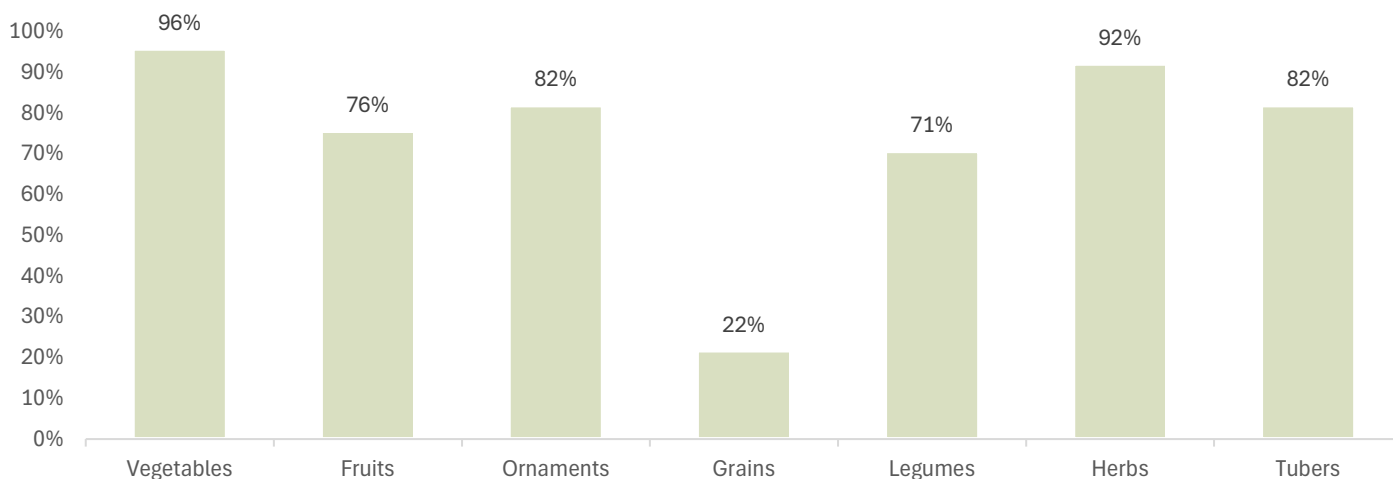


**Figure 2.** Which of the following best describes your position in the seed value chain? (n=382)

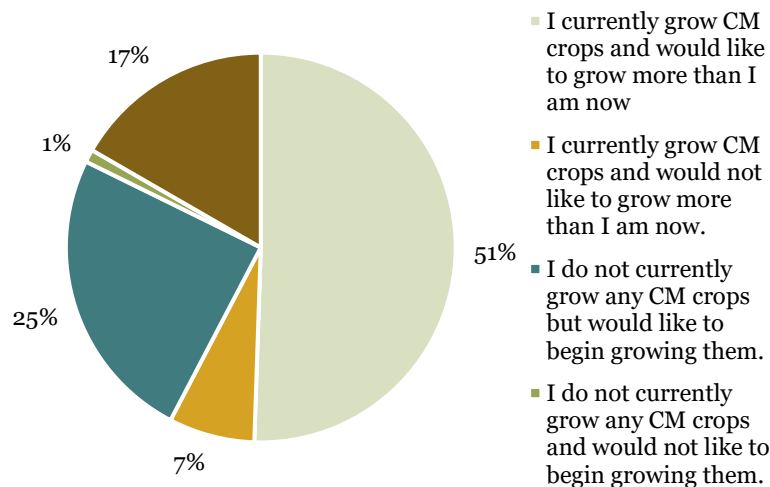
When looking at the characteristics of both current UCFA growers and potential UCFA growers together, most growers self-identify as gardeners (80%), followed by urban gardeners (17%) and rural farmers (3%) (Figure 2). Paired with the findings from Figure 3, which suggest that 80% of seed growers within the sub-sample of interest for this supplementary report grew between 1 and 20 seed crops during the 2023 growing season (for their entire production, not necessarily for UCFA specifically) (Figure 3), current and potential UCFA growers that completed the survey can be assumed to mainly operate at small scales. This is further validated by the fact that 78% of respondents within the sub-sample reported having 10 acres or less of land from which they can use to grow food and/or seed – and 58% grew on 2 acres or less.



**Figure 3.** How many seed crops did you grow for the 2023 growing season? (n= 262)



**Figure 4.** Which of the follow crops do you grow in your farm/garden? (n=382)



**Figure 5.** Which of the following best describes your current cultivation of CM crops? (n=378)

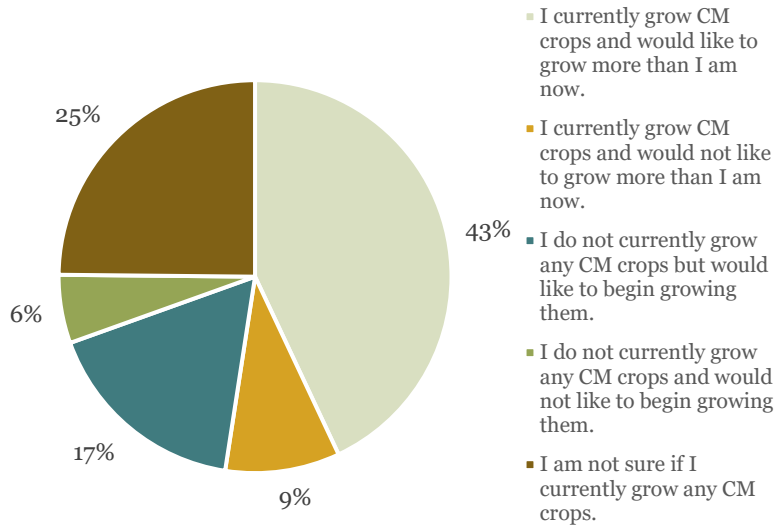
The small-scale production of this sub-sample helps explain why, for the 43 individuals that said they were already affiliated with Ujamaa, the majority reported growing small quantities of seed crops specifically meant to supply UCFA: 53% of current seed growers reported growing fewer than 4 seed crops per season for UCFA and only 2 growers reported growing more than 10 seed crops per season.

This finding does not necessarily suggest that current or potential UCFA growers do not grow a wide array of crops outside of those from which they produce seed. As displayed in Figure 4, growers reported planting a variety of different types of crops in their farms and gardens – although vegetables (96%) and herbs (92%) are

the most common. In comparison, grains are much less frequently grown by respondents (22%), perhaps due to the difficulty associated with growing grain on small scales.

This sub-sample of growers is also already interested (or have expressed interest) in growing culturally meaningful (CM) seed, as displayed in Figure 5. Like other questions in this section, this question was asked to all farmers and gardeners who took the survey. However, Figure 5 shows that the sub-sample of respondents interested in growing for UCFA are, on the whole, already growing (51%) or would like to expand their current cultivation (25%). Moreover, a lower percentage (17% as

opposed to 25% in the overall sample (Figure 6)) are unsure about whether they are already growing CM crops, suggesting this group may be more educated and interested in CM crops than the entire survey sample overall.



**Figure 6.** Which of the following best describes your current cultivation of CM crops? (n=1428)

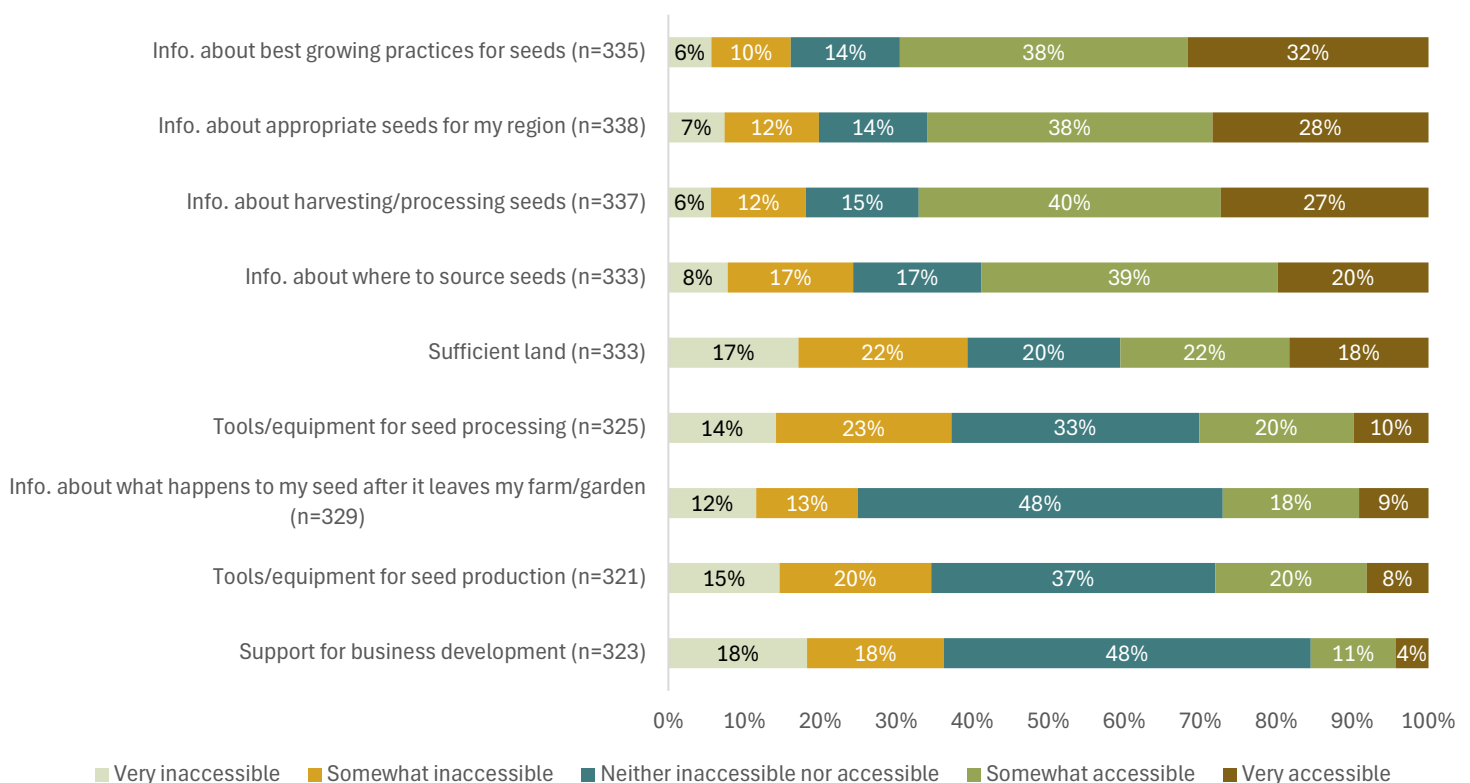
\*Note: the sample size for this question is larger than for other questions reported in this supplemental report due to being pulled from the entire sampling frame.

rupture in the possibility of us embedding cultural meaning into the foods we work with. So, I think that's one of the provocative and profound possibilities in the work of reclaiming culturally meaningful food for people... It makes it political." This highlights that those interested in growing seeds for UCFA are likely already thinking about seeds as culturally important, rather than needing to be educated on the importance before they want to grow CM seeds themselves, as was more commonly the case among the overall sample (indicated by a quarter of farmers and gardeners of the entire sample being unsure if they were currently growing foods that would qualify as culturally meaningful as per Figure 6).

During their focus group, UCFA growers were clearly able to articulate the definition of culturally meaningful seed and what it meant to them personally. Given their affiliation to UCFA and their personal experiences within the collective, this is perhaps not surprising, though it provides an interesting point of contrast to the overall sample within the main report and suggests that those involved with or interested in UCFA consider seeds in a different light than those in the overall sample who did not express interest in UCFA. For instance, as one Ujamaa grower articulated during the focus group, "...I think this idea that a seed can have embedded cultural meaning feels novel to us because there's a

## RESOURCE & INFORMATION NEEDS

With the intention of providing insight for UCFA and other similar organizations regarding how they can best support CM seed producers, we asked UCFA growers/potential growers about the accessibility of resources and information that may impact their ability to grow seed crops (Figure 7). According to respondents, resources that were very or somewhat accessible included information regarding best seed growing practices (somewhat or very accessible=70%), seed harvesting/processing information (67%), and information surrounding seeds most appropriate for the grower’s region (66%). The least accessible resources included sufficient land (somewhat or very inaccessible=40%), tools/equipment for seed processing (30%) and seed production (28%), and support for business development (15%). Based on these results, it appears that UCFA growers/potential growers are equipped with much of the necessary information related to seed growing but often lack material resources and business support services.

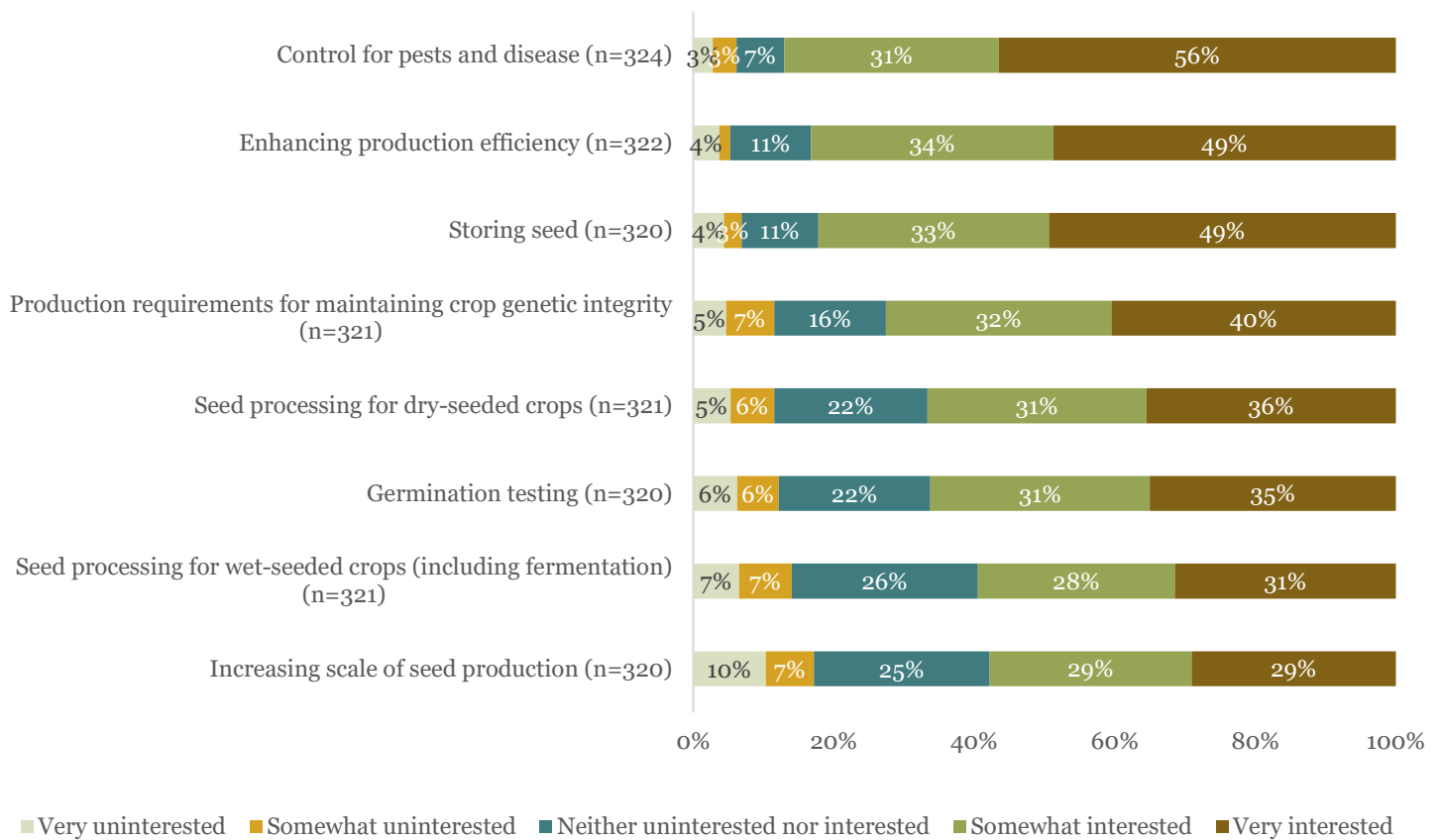


**Figure 7.** For the seed crops that you grow, how accessible are these resources to meet your needs?

At the same time, discussion during the focus group of Ujamaa growers illuminated that for business development resources to be useful, a market first needs to be developed that supports CM seeds. As expressed by one grower in the UCFA focus group, “I feel like we’re sort of at a tipping point where there’s enough people who are interested in growing some of this stuff, but there’s no real market set up yet...We need a more diverse cadre of champions across more diverse local places speaking about more diverse kinds of seed- and food-ways.”

In addition to asking what resources and information were accessible to UCFA current and potential growers, we also asked about interest in more information related to seed production specifically. Interestingly, although UCFA current and potential growers indicated that information about seed cultivation is relatively accessible, they still expressed interest in additional information about control for pests and disease (87% indicated some level of interest), production efficiency (83%), and seed storage (82%) (Figure 8). In addition, responses from UCFA current and potential growers demonstrated interest in learning more about critical factors to be competitive in the seed market: 72% were interested in production requirements, 66% in germination testing, and 58% in increasing scale of seed operation.

Complementing survey results, the focus group of Ujamaa growers also highlighted an interest in learning more about the more personal aspects of seeds. As one current UCFA grower mentioned during the focus group, which others agreed about, *“I’m really interested in just learning as much as I can ...I think there is some relationship between embracing your identity and the seeds that you might want to learn about.”* Based on this feedback that growers are interested in how their personal identities connect to seeds and the food they grow, it appears that there is interest in education surrounding both seed production but also the role that seeds play socially and culturally to farmers and gardeners. Because of this array of interests, UCFA has the potential to produce supportive training and educational materials that are novel in that they can connect technical information on seed production with the cultural attributes of seeds.

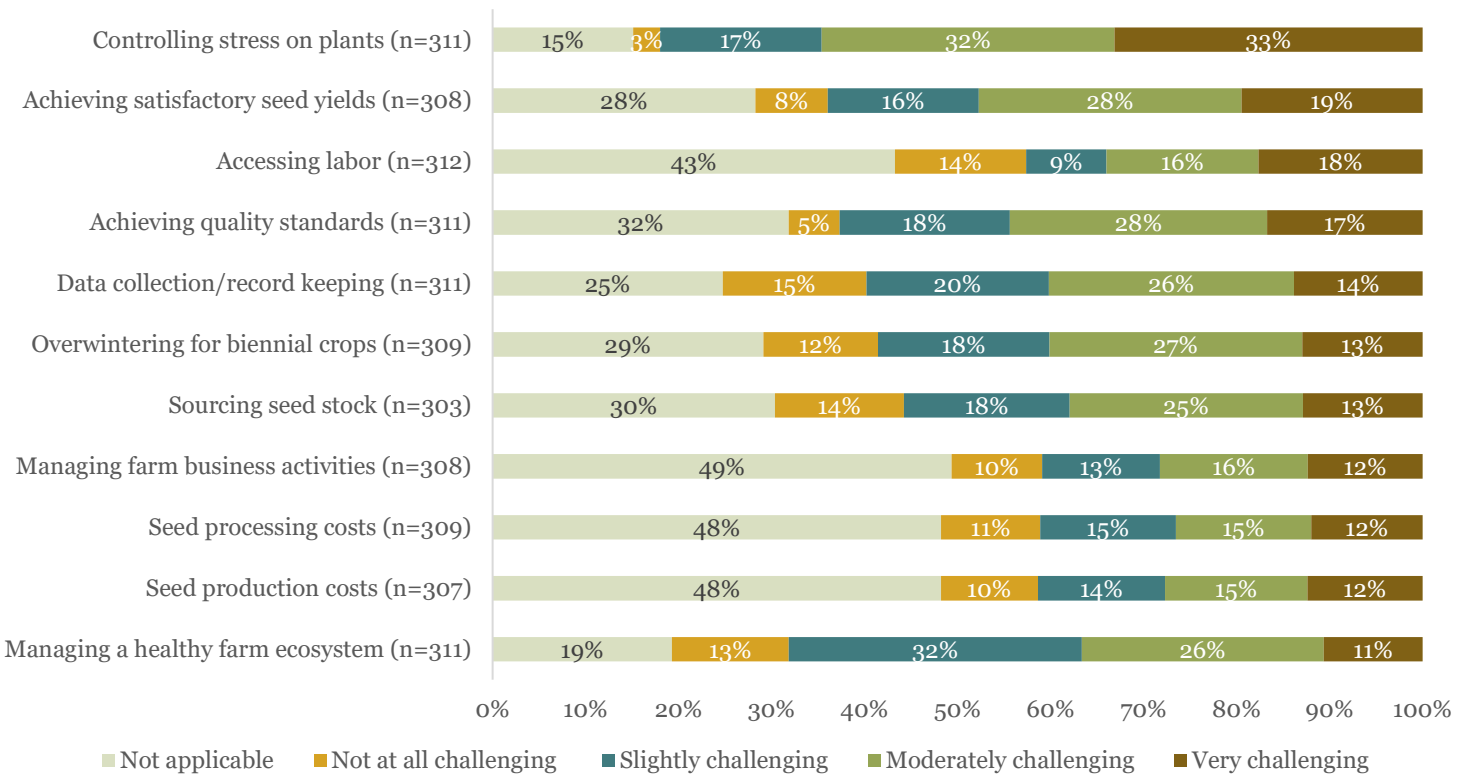


**Figure 8.** For the seed crops that you grow, please indicate your interest in having more information about each of the following topics related to seed production.

## OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

When asked about challenges they face in relation to their seed growing operation (Figure 9), UCFA growers/potential growers reported that they experience the most challenges with controlling stress on plants (82% indicated some level of a challenge) and achieving satisfactory seed yields (63%). However, we also note that for many of the challenges about which we asked, many were not at all challenging or not at all applicable. For example, challenges related to the business of seed production - processing and production costs, managing business activities, and accessing labor - were not applicable to over 40% of respondents. This can be likely explained by the heavy representation of gardeners within this sub-sample who are likely producing primarily for home consumption, even despite general interest in seed markets and business management (see Figures 6 and 8).

Given the current likely orientation toward home consumption among many UCFA current and potential growers, introductory materials about business development will likely not yet be relevant for many potential UCFA growers who have yet to sell their seeds commercially, meaning that programs offered to UCFA growers may need to be flexible to the needs of different producers with different capacities and interests in entering the seed market. One crucial consideration which adds more complexity is the recognition that not all growers of CM seed will want to market their seeds. Creating mechanisms within UCFA that support non-market relationships with CM seed may also provide an area for program enhancement. For example, an online seed library and opportunities to participate in research initiatives offer promising avenues for further exploration.



**Figure 9.** For the seed crops that you grow, please rate how challenging you find the following practices related to your seed growing operation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the information provided above, as well as context gained from the full report, the following recommendations may help UCFA in their efforts to market CM and support their seed growers:

- Considering that 70% of UCFA growers/potential growers grow fewer than 10 crops for seed, **additional efforts may be needed that specifically supports small-scale farmers and gardeners access outlets to sell their seeds.** Seed hubs, of which UCFA are already supporting, can provide a centralized and coordinated tool for smaller growers to get their seeds into the hands of consumers.
- UCFA growers/potential growers expressed wide-ranging needs for resources. However, the most needed resource needs included information about how to improve production practices. Programmatically, **UCFA should enhance learning opportunities related to topics such as best seed growing practices, choosing seeds well-adapted to local climates, and harvesting/processing seeds.**
- Survey respondents reported being interested in more information related to seed production overall, with controlling for pests and diseases, enhancing production efficiency, and storing seed being the topics with the most amount of interest. **Educational opportunities through UCFA or other partners can help seed growers improve their knowledge in these areas.** As a starting point, educational opportunities may start with training on seed production for vegetables and herbs, which the majority of the survey sub-sample reported growing.
- Given that many UCFA growers/potential growers are gardeners or otherwise grow at small scales, UCFA will need to balance the needs and desires of growers that range in their degree of their ability (and interest) to grow seed at commercial scales. That said, opportunities to market seed exist for all scales of growers, such that **direct technical assistance for UCFA growers will be necessary so that, if interested, UCFA growers know their options given isolation and space requirements depending on different crop species and varieties.**
- As UCFA continues to engage small-scale growers and provide an avenue for added revenue through commercial seed production, **business support services will likely need to be both expanded and tiered according to capacity and interest among members.** The findings of the survey show interest among many growers, but also a lack of applicability among many who may not be at the point of selling their seed or wanting to sell their seeds.
- Acknowledging limitations of space for many growers, and the finding that 58% of UCFA growers/potential growers are growing on less than 2 acres of land, **continued advocacy for material resources (land and tools for production and seed processing, which were both found to be among the least accessible resources among survey respondents) will be necessary to support growers.**

These findings provide a first view of what needs and interests exist among UCFA growers and potential growers. Next steps should use these findings and recommendations as a foundation from which to better understand the ways in which growers want to participate in training, education, and collaboration. Knowing that growers want more information related to certain topics is valuable, but there still may be uncertainty over how to best give this information (e.g., through in-person workshops, one-on-one mentoring, asynchronous materials, etc.). Future research and outreach can dive deeper into these preferences to best position UCFA to provide meaningful and impactful resources to their membership.