

Vegetable Seed Production Course and Mentorship Available to Growers Throughout the Northeast

By Crystal Stewart Courtens

Today's market gardener in the Northeast finds themselves a net user of seed, not a net producer. However, as we have seen a resurgence in local food supply in the last 40 years, we have also seen the beginning of a rebirth of regional seed. Many reasons to grow seed are the same now as they were for previous generations of farmers: to ensure a reliable supply of seed of a needed variety, to offer something unique to the customer, to preserve and promote treasured heirlooms, and to grow a value-added product for a seed company or direct seed packet sales. Organic growers will find another benefit to seed growing: it helps the farmer meet the "seed rule" standards of organic seed usage, and helps reduce seed costs.

In order to increase the number of growers able to produce high quality, regionally adapted seed in the northeast, a group of educators, experienced seed producers, and regional seed companies will be working together to offer training in seed production and a guaranteed market for specific seed crops during 2023 and 2024. This effort is funded through generous support of a Northeast SARE Research and Education grant.

The effort to help 65 commercial growers produce a marketable seed crop will begin in January of 2023. We will bring folks together for an in-person kickoff meeting if it is safe to come together. Everyone can then participate in the seed conference (part of the NOFA-NY winter conference), scheduled for February 2nd-5th, followed by five weeks of online course work developed and led by experienced seed producers and hosted by the Organic Seed Alliance. The course is designed to help growers determine whether seed production is a good choice for their farm first, and then to guide them in selecting an initial seed crop to try. During the course folks will form learning cohorts of 5-10 growers who will work with a mentor throughout the 2023 growing season to successfully produce a marketable seed crop that various northeast seed companies have committed to purchase. The cohorts will have monthly group check-ins via Zoom, a forum where they can discuss questions and issues with each other, and one-on-one access to a grower mentor experienced in producing their chosen seed crop.

The grower mentors for this course bring substantial experience in seed production to the effort, and will help participants deepen their understanding of how to cultivate vegetables to produce the highest quality seed. Amirah Mitchell has worked in agriculture and food justice since 2007. She founded her business, Sistah Seeds in Emmaus, PA, to connect black and brown growers to culturally important seeds. She primarily grows vegetable, herb and grain seeds from across the African diaspora, with a focus on African American, Afro-Caribbean, and West African cultural crops. Amirah graduated from Temple University with a B.S. in horticulture, and she has a gift for helping others understand why plants do what they do and how this information can help us produce great seed. Her enthusiasm for the work, from a human and a horticultural perspective, is infectious.

Our other commercial mentor for this project, Heron Breen, owns and operates Fruits of our Labors Farm in Saint Albans, Maine. His experience has been as a market farmer who has become almost solely a seed grower. When he started his own operation 17 years ago farmers markets were "filling up", and like many new farmers, direct retail was hard to access. At the same time, he was a home seed saver, and had discovered some amazing regional heirlooms and classics with incredible flavor. He felt these could be a market niche & focus, and that required him to grow his own good seed. He had the added benefit of working for a seed company (Fedco Seeds) for his "day" job or seasonal income. For many

years, he worked 40 hours at his day job and 40 hours on the farm. After 22 years in the seed trade, he is glad to be farming full-time, and with a near exclusive focus on seed growing. Like the market farmers of the past, he has also been breeding new things. It is a great joy for him to share this journey and related lessons with other market growers, as I am sure everyone involved in this project will get to experience.

Besides the commercial component, this project also has an Indigenous seed keeping component which is being directed by Tina Square of the Intertribal Ag Council. Tina has recruited 30 Indigenous seed keepers who would like to both study the horticultural aspects of seed growing being focused on in the online course and also work with an Indigenous seedkeeping mentor to maintain seed quality while also maintaining the sacred aspects of seed keeping. Our primary Indigenous mentor is Angela Ferguson, Onondaga Nation and Eel Clan member. Angela has been stewarding Iroquois corn for much of her life, and works tirelessly to increase her people's connection to their sacred foods and to increase food security for the Onondaga Nation by managing the Onondaga Nation's farm. Angela has also graciously agreed to teach workshops for the commercial seedkeeping track about the history of native seed appropriation and ways that we can all work to respect the unique integrity of native seeds essential to the culture of Native peoples.

Parallel to these education efforts, we are also conducting some initial research to determine whether growing seed in a controlled environment (caterpillar/high tunnels) will increase the quality or yield of seed crops. Our model crops are onions and lettuce, both of which are being grown in replicated trials this season and will be grown on daughter sites on farms next season. There are many research questions related to Northeast seed production, but this first will be a starting point to help farmers understand where they might grow different seed crops for best results in this region with more frequent rains than traditional seed growing regions.

If you are interested in being a part of the seed education cohort, please fill out our quick intake form by visiting this link https://cornell.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eVE6pUIHbQSelc or using the QR code below. If you have any questions about the project, or need help accessing the form, you can reach Crystal at cls263@cornell.edu.

