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Contact: Janis Wong, media relations
The Kohala Center
jwong@kohalacenter.org
direct: 808-325-1114, office: 808-887-6411

Symposium looks at saving and restoring seed in Hawai‘i

KAMUELA, Hawai‘i—February 18, 2010—Seed is the foundation of a thriving local agricultural economy and is essential to the development of Hawai‘i’s food production, future sustainability, and self-reliance. Hawai‘i currently imports nearly 90 percent of its food and 99 percent of its seed, creating a vulnerable and dependent agricultural economy in the state.

Restoring and revitalizing the local seed industry is the goal of the Hua Ka Hua—Restore Our Seed Symposium on April 17 and 18 at the Outrigger Keauhou Beach Resort in Kona. Farmers, gardeners, and seed experts from around the state and Mainland will share ways to grow, select, and save high quality seeds for both home and market during the symposium.

Participants will also help to plan a public seed initiative to support on-farm/garden research and expertise in seed variety trials, selection, saving and storage, and collaborate on the development of an open-pollinated organic seed industry for market farmers and home gardeners.

“Seed as a living, renewable, and sustainable agricultural treasure,” said Nancy Redfeather of The Kohala Center. Redfeather is coordinator for the symposium and for the Hawai‘i Island Seed Exchange. “Only by growing it out, having the knowledge to shepherd and steward it, improve and save it, and pass it on to our communities and our children will we begin to address the concerns of future food security. Seed remains our connection to food, culture, family, community, land, and life. Seed is the living source of life on Earth.

“Open-pollinated seed is being lost at a rapid rate. In the United States, 95 percent of varieties grown in 1900 are no longer available. Worldwide, in the past century, three-quarters of our food biodiversity has been lost. Of all the food plant varieties that once fed humanity, only 25 percent remain, and only 10 percent of the remaining varieties are available for sale today. These hardy genetic varieties were the mainstay of the home and the market garden for centuries.

“Over the last three decades, plant breeders have focused on developing varieties that are adapted to high-input industrial agriculture, and have long shelf life and uniformity that is more suited to large-scale farms. The seed needs of organic, low-input and smaller scale farmers and gardeners have not been addressed, and there is great potential for adapting varieties for these

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food producers. It is our vision that seed working groups will emerge from this symposium to gather knowledge, do variety trials, and offer field days to share seed and information on-farm—leading to production of high quality seed for both the home and market," Redfeather said.

The symposium features presentations by statewide and national seed experts on topics ranging from a historical perspective and reproduction of Hawaiian crops, and the state of seed in Hawai‘i to variety improvement/breeding and seed cleaning, saving and storage. Symposium presenters include:

- Hector R. Valenzuela, Ph.D., Crop Extension Specialist, College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR), University of Hawai‘i (UH) at Manoa;
- Theodore J.K. Radovich, Ph.D., Sustainable Farming Systems Laboratory, Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, UH Manoa;
- Alvin Yoshinaga, Ph.D., Restoration Ecologist, Center for Conservation Research and Training, UH Manoa;
- Matthew Dillon, director of advocacy, Organic Seed Alliance;
- Micaela Colley, director of research and education, Organic Seed Alliance;
- Frank Morton, Wild Garden Seeds in Philomath, Oregon;
- John Navazio, Ph.D., research and education specialist for Organic Seed Alliance and Extension Plant Breeding, and seed specialist for Washington State University;
- Jerry Konanui, expert in Hawaiian food plant varieties, their propagation, cultivation, harvesting, processing, and use.

The symposium includes a seed swap sponsored by Regeneration Botanical Garden of Kaua‘i, and information booths are available for a nominal fee to conference participants.

A free public lecture will precede the symposium from 5:30–7 p.m. Friday, April 16, at the resort. "The Story of Seed: Wild, Domesticated, Bred, and Engineered—Where Did We Begin and Where Might We Go?" will be presented by Dillon and Morton.

Symposium planners are surveying potential participants about their interest and knowledge of seed growing and saving. The survey initially elicited 106 statewide responses. Visit http://kohalacenter.org/seedsymposium/assessment.html by March 1 to participate in the survey.

Registration is $100 by March 15; $150 after March 15 (cost includes buffet lunch for both days). To register, go to http://www.kohalacenter.org/seedsymposium/registration.html. The Outrigger Keauhou Beach Resort is offering a special symposium room rate.

The symposium is hosted by The Kohala Center, with funding through an USDA Organic Research and Education Initiative (OREI) grant. Other sponsors include the College of Agriculture, Forestry, and Natural Resource Management, UH Hilo; the College of Tropical

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Agriculture and Human Resources, UH Manoa; the County of Hawai‘i; and Keauhou-Kahalu‘u Education Group/Kamehameha Schools.

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