

Seeding the future for local farms

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Experience
an island



Sharing seeds at last year's Hawai'i Island Seed Exchange at the Amy B.H. Greenwell Ethnobotanical Garden in Captain Cook. - Craig Elevitch

community coming together to literally share the seeds of their gardening success and knowledge. It's happening at the 7th Annual Hawai'i Island Seed Exchange, Saturday, June 13, from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Amy B. H. Greenwell Ethnobotanical Garden in Captain Cook.

Gardeners know that one of the rules of success is to plant what grows well locally -- just look in your neighbors' gardens. And being able to plant their seeds is a special bonus. So, come early and share your seeds, cuttings, roots, and keiki plants at the Exchange to help build community food self-reliance, biodiversity, and health. (No potted plants will be allowed to prevent spreading the little fire ant.)

The opening ceremony will be led by Kumu Keala Ching and Ka Pa Hula Na Wai Iwi Ola. In line with this year's theme, "Moon and Agriculture -- Relationships and Connections," Hi'ilani Shibata will present "Stories of the Moon Goddess Hina," while a panel of Hawaiian farmers will discuss the Moon and Agriculture in Hawai'i. Other presenters include Craig Elevitch, a sustainable gardening specialist who will explain how to "Store Food in the Landscape."

Why is this annual event so well-attended and important? Seeds are the beginning and the end of agriculture, explains event organizer Nancy Redfeather. "Today we have lost 95 percent of the open-pollinated (plants whose seed is true to type) varieties of food crops that were grown in 1900. For 10,000 years, farmers and gardeners all over the planet grew, observed, selected and improved seed varieties. Hybrid seed cannot be saved and reproduced, and neither can genetically modified (GM) seeds, because every gene is some company's intellectual property."

On the other hand, Redfeather explains, "Plants grown from open-pollinated seed have the ability to genetically engineer themselves. They can respond to weather conditions, light conditions, and change the makeup of their 'expression' in the next generation. They can adapt and improve their growth, flavor and hardiness.

"It is time for farmers and gardeners all over Hawai'i to take back the right to plant, grow, select, improve, save and pass on locally adapted seed varieties," Redfeather said.

Standing in the corner ready to wage legal and market wars against farmers is the Goliath of the seed world, Monsanto. According to the Institute of Science in Society, Monsanto now has unprecedented control of the sale and use of seed for a variety of plants, from carrots to tomatoes, soybeans, strawberries, cotton, lettuce and corn. It has accomplished this in three ways: by controlling the stores of germplasm (the elemental portion of the seed that contains its genetic information), by purchasing seed companies worldwide, and by acquiring genetic technology and GM seeds through patents.

While these strategic moves by Monsanto are good for its stockholders' bottom line, they are a death knell for the age-old farming tradition of saving and re-planting seeds. Farmers are forced to buy new seed stock every year, which in turn will need to be sprayed and fertilized by Monsanto's daunting agricultural chemical arsenal.

"Monsanto now controls 60 percent of the world's seed," says Redfeather. "I am uncomfortable with that. Their past history shows they are unworthy stewards of our food supply. Their mission is to sell chemicals and control the foods of the world beginning with the grains that everyone needs to survive."

An Organic Public Seed Breeding Initiative will be starting in Hawai'i in 2010. A coalition has formed between professors at UH Manoa and UH Hilo, The Kohala Center, The Organic Seed Alliance and their university partners. The public will have a chance to participate in learning about and working with others to develop locally adapted seed varieties.

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