

Seed sharing

By Terrie Henderson

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The Hawaiian tradition to mahale with their neighbors didn't start with who's bringing the lau lau to the next beach party. Farmers sharing their crops with the community and giving back to the aina is real Hawaiian legacy, and that's just what the Kohala Center and its partners are hoping to re-invent with the public seed initiative.

The "Hua Ka Kua - Restore Our Seed" program recently received a federal grant to move forward on planning a statewide effort to build the program, which basically encourages farmers, gardeners and seed experts to help each other to find the seed variety that will flourish in their particular climate, soil and market.

Nancy Redfeather, a member of the Kohala Center who is helping to spearhead the effort, said there are only a few programs like this left in the United States and they are fortunate to have received federal funding from the USDA Organic Research and Education Initiative.

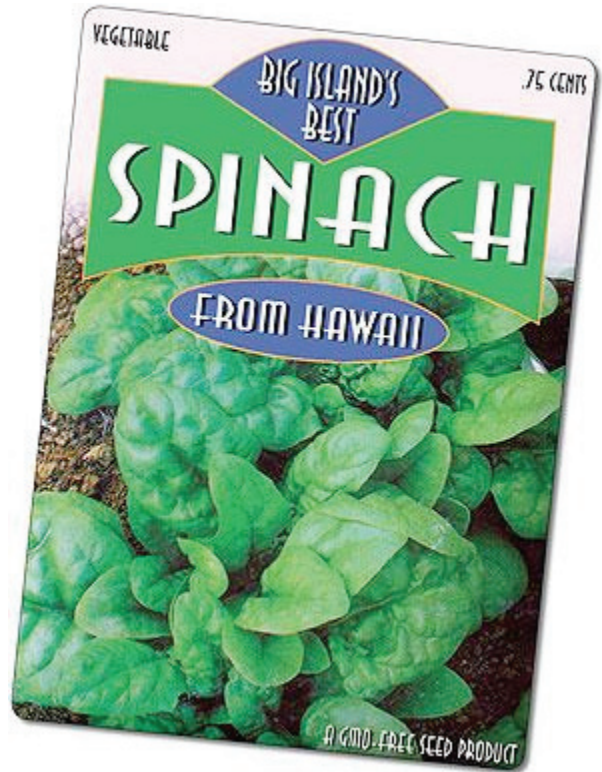
"Seed is a living resource and must be continually used to keep viable," she said. "First we need to regain the knowledge of seed growing and saving ... We are just starting down a long road, and will need public involvement."

Redfeather and other program planners hope to get the public interested in this effort by hosting a symposium on seed sharing, as well as connecting the seed community such as corporations, university researchers and government agencies with nonprofits and small-scale seed producers. Ultimately, it is hoped that discoveries will be made in plant-breeding techniques as well as increasing the number of small-scale seed growers in Hawai'i.

Teaming up with University of Hawai'i-Manoa, the Organic Seed Alliance (OSA) and The Organic Seed Growers and Trade Association (OSGATA), the program's first step is to appeal to those people who are interested in seed sharing and assess their knowledge and interest in learning more about seed growing, saving and breeding. Redfeather said a planned symposium will be held in Kona in the spring and will focus on "the next steps to revive and renew seed growing and saving, obtaining the necessary knowledge to do so, doing variety trials and organizing island-wide and statewide groups to develop locally grown and saved seed."

Once that is done, Redfeather said those behind the project could consider the concept of a seed bank for the state.

This issue is especially a hot-button on the Big Island because many organizations are still fighting for GMO-free crops, which starts with the seed. Russell Ruderman, owner of Island Naturals Markets, said he wants to see the state step away from Genetically Modified Organisms agriculture. He supports local farmers working together, exchanging seeds and ideas to feed the islands in a natural, healthy way.



Photos By Shawn Pila



The Hawai'i Farmers Union (HFU) said they also wholeheartedly support the seed initiative in Hawai'i, and would like to see the islands step up and grow identity-preserved seeds (GMO-free) for the rest of the world.

"In HFU we are looking forward to a legislative session where we begin to refocus the conversation and economic imperative for identity-preserved (non-GMO) seed production in Hawai'i," said Eden Marie Peart of the Hawai'i Farmers Union.

UH-Manoa's Dr. Hector Valenzuela recently wrote a column about the importance of diversified agriculture that appeared in a Honolulu newspaper on June 29. To Valenzuela, who sent his column to Big Island Weekly, growing food is about more than economics, it's also about being self-sufficient and protecting the islands' natural resources.

"Issues of food security have taken a new sense of urgency in the islands given the recent global economic crisis, and given the renewed awareness about the potential effects of climate change. Over the past couple of years I have been invited around the state to talk about these issues, by farmer and community groups, concerned about the future of agriculture in Hawai'i,"

Valenzuela writes in his column that "little community discussion has occurred about the type of agriculture we should have in the state and around our rural communities. Because we live in a democracy, and because natural resources such as land, water, and air are a public trust, the public should have a say about the type of agriculture that we should have in our open green landscapes ... As a state, we need to remove the long-entrenched blinders of the plantation model of agriculture and think about establishing more equitable, culturally sensitive, and environmentally sound systems of farming."

Need for seed information?

- To learn more about the Public Seed Initiative, visit
- Information about the Public Seed Planning Symposium can be obtained after Aug. 16 by contacting Nancy Redfeather at or 322-2801.
- Updates and information on the Hawai'i Farmers Union efforts can be found by visiting
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