

Need for Seed

Captain Cook event encourages plant diversity, self-sufficiency

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Maintaining Hawaii Island's agricultural diversity is dependent on residents sharing seeds, and the Hawaii Island Seed Exchange provides the venue for people to do just that.

"The seed exchange is a time for everyone to come together and exchange seeds from different parts of a island and learn about the work that each other is doing," said event coordinator Nancy Redfeather. "We need to preserve agricultural diversity because it's important to keep a lot of varieties of food going because that contributes to the health of agriculture overall."

Kona Palisades resident Priscilla Studholme brought various plant trimmings, seeds and tubers to share with other Big Islanders at the Saturday event at the Amy B.H. Greenwell Ethnobotanical Garden in Captain Cook.

In fact, one of the tubers she brought, a variety of turmeric, came full-circle at the event when another gardener, West Hawaii Today tropical gardening columnist Diana Duff, whose turmeric didn't appear to survive the recent drought, realized she had given Studholme the same variety several years earlier.

"I thought I had lost it, but now I can replant it," Duff said.

More than 70 people attended the annual seed exchange that provides the opportunity to meet and swap seeds, trimmings and knowledge with local gardeners and farmers. The event has been held in South Kona since 2003.

About 90 percent of Hawaii's food is imported, Redfeather said, adding that up until the 1940s Hawaii was totally self-sufficient and at one point, wheat and rice were being produced in the islands.

Further, she said, about 90 to 95 percent of the plant varieties grown in 1900 have been lost.



"Our food is getting homogenized and becoming mass produced," Redfeather said. "(Exchanging seeds) is a way that locals can take back and grow their own food and keep the diversity of our food."

Various exhibits at the event provided instruction and tips on stopping the spread of the little fire ant, seed saving, propagation and growing plants in the Big Island's many climates, elevations and soils.

Throughout the garden, men, women and children inspected cups, buckets, wagons and boxes filled with locally grown plant trimmings, trees and seeds, including edible hibiscus and tobacco, as well as a handful of dwarf apple banana trees, which were snagged up in just minutes.

Studholme explained her edible hibiscus, which grows at her 1,000-foot elevation home in Kona and produces flowers, bears leaves that when cooked take on a flavor similar to spinach. She said the leaves are too tough to eat as a raw green.

"It's really good in Indian food and stir-fry," she added.

At the event, Redfeather also announced she is working to develop community "seed working groups" in every district of the island to take over



Participants shake seeds from dried lettuce stalks Saturday at the eighth annual Big Island Seed Exchange at the Amy B.H. Greenwell Ethnobotanical Garden in Captain Cook. - Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today

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Mayumi Oda, right, reaches for seeds from Tom Baldwin's Ulu Wehi Farm in Kohala at the eighth annual Big Island Seed Exchange on Saturday in Captain Cook. - Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today

management of the annual event. She said after eight years, the exchange has outgrown her ability to manage it.

"I can't hold this anymore (on my own). It's too much and it's too big for me now. It's ready to take on a life of its own. It needs to move on, but on its own," she said. When asked if the annual seed exchange in Captain Cook would end, Redfeather quickly said no, explaining the community groups

would form a committee to plan the event, and it would likely be still held in Captain Cook during the spring.