

# Not Just Any Seed | Molokai Dispatch

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Community Contributed by Glenn I. Teves, UH County Extension Agent



Some people think that saving seeds is a waste of time because it's easier to order them from a seed catalog or pick them up at the nearest supermarket. It's not that simple. Some varieties developed for cold climates may not be the best for us. Good seed must be adapted to our special climate considering all its idiosyncrasies, such as high humidity, warm nights and arid conditions. Not just any seed will do.

Several years ago, a flood ravaged our seed laboratory on the University of Hawaii (UH) Manoa campus. In it is a gold mine of seeds developed in Hawaii, and some are almost impossible to replace. One of them was STEP 305. Alone, STEP 305 wasn't considered good enough to be released, but when crossed with a UH tomato named Anahu it produced one of the most prolific and tasty hybrid tomatoes called N-52. Developed in Hawaii, N-52 was resistant to over eight different diseases and also spider mites and root knot nematodes. We cannot produce N-52 anymore until we find STEP 305, so I decided to track it down.

Cognizant of the fact that since 1970, we have lost 75 percent of our local seed worldwide, I spent a few hours rummaging through another seed reefer on the UH Manoa campus. The magoon lab reefer is the size of a large office where all kinds of vegetable seeds are stored, but not STEP 305. As I was leaving after lunch, I threw some rubbish in a dumpster outside the reefer. Looking in, I found about 40 pounds of corn seed in large plastic bags. Someone had dumped them a few days earlier. These were not just any old corn seed, but ancient varieties collected from little towns all over Mexico, the ancestral home of corn. Donated by farmers, these seeds were passed down through generations of farmers over hundreds of years. Names like Oaxaca and Reventador, some seeds were gold, others were silver and some were bronze. I thought I had found hidden treasure but I had to put them in the reefer for another day's work.

Next was checking the USDA Germplasm Laboratory at Cornell University where they store thousands of varieties of vegetable seeds. Looking through their list, I bumped into three Hawaii lettuce varieties. I only heard stories about them from my predecessors, since they were "lost" over 50 years ago, but someone was smart enough to send it to USDA for safekeeping. USDA recently sent me the seed and I'm trying to increase it, and hopefully make it available soon. But still no STEP 305.

After checking other universities that conduct tomato research with no success, I felt I must have overlooked something. Maybe Googling STEP 305 would do it. Low and behold, I find STEP 305 listed in a little seed store in Alsace, France near the Belgium border, so I email the store and I'm waiting for their reply, hopefully in English. It took a while to locate STEP 305, and I still don't have it my hand, but it's worth the wait because it's not just any seed. It's the parent of N-52.

