

## **Growing Knowledge about Growing Seed**

By Andrea Berry

Less than 1% of certified organic acreage in the US is planted in certified organic seed. Through my work as an organic inspector with an ear to the organic seed sector, I can safely assume the stats are the same here in Atlantic Canada. Why is this so? Four reasons: 1) *Lack of quality*. 2) *Lack of quantity*. 3) *Lack of variety*. All these factors lead many certified organic producers to take advantage of reason 4) *Loophole in organic standards allowing use of non-organic seed under circumstance of commercial unavailability*. Organic seed currently comes predominantly from 2 different sources – 1) Small-scale farms producing and marketing their own seed, many times specializing in rare and heritage cultivars, and 2) Huge industrial seed production companies with thousands of acres and dollars invested but just starting to jump on the organic niche market. The former can often supply a variety of quality seed selection, however struggle to ensure the quantities of seed that market gardeners and farmers require. The latter often find they can meet the quantity demand, but do not offer a diverse selection.

Recent expansion in my own organic seed business, *Hope Seeds & Perennials*, encouraged me to try and address these issues. What better way than to seek the advice of experts in the field? In July 2007 my partner and I packed up the car, turned the compost one last time, and headed on a tour of organic seed producers and companies in Ontario, Vermont and Maine. The intention was to get a better sense of how HSP compares in size, shape and systems to the others out there, and get some inspiration and expert advice on how to proceed. We visited Adrien Emond (Jardins aux Quatre Vents, Edmundston, NB), Gabi and Christian Boettcher (Trachener Biodynamic Farm, Brussels, ON), Bob Wildfong (Everdale Environmental Learning Centre, Seeds of Diversity Canada demonstration gardens, Hillsburg, ON), Karyn Wright (Terra Edibles, Foxboro, ON), Greta Kryger (Greta's Organic Seeds, Ottawa, ON), Tom Stearns (High Mowing Seeds, Wolcott, VT), Will Bonsall (Khandigar Farm, Industry, ME) and Nikos Kavanaugh (Fedco, Unity, ME).

All welcomed my inquisitions and forever flashing camera, and were willing to share both their successes and challenges. We found a wide range in scale and focus of operations and markets. Some companies produced solely for the home gardener market, others were centred on bulk sales to farms and retail stores. One company is structured as a grower co-op "farming out" all of their seed production, while others emphasize the point that they grow and process all of their own seed. It was reassuring to see that some were operating at a scale similar to mine (small acreage, minimal equipment), but inspiring to see the larger companies with multiple acres in seed production and research trials, full-time staff to handle quality control, research, contract growers, seed processing and cleaning, marketing and customer service.

One similarity across the board was each company's dedication to organics. Certification is a necessary part of assuring their growing customer base that their products are responsibly farmed, and gives a key market advantage. Yet at the same time, every person we talked to emphasized the importance of the human connection, making sure

that you're close to your growers, staff and customers. As Tom Stearns of High Mowing Seeds put it, "The organic seed industry is one of the only remaining industries that still operate on an honest handshake. Invest time and resources in good people, let them know you've got a quality product that they can trust, and you'll rise above the rest".

The July seed tour was essential in building those personal relationships. I now feel part of an informal organic seed company network, often calling on the experts I met, seeking their advice. I have further deepened the mentor connection with Tom Stearns, as I spent the last week in November in Wolcott, interning at High Mowing Seeds. This allowed me to move beyond the initial "guest tour" in July, into the internal workings of the business from large-scale crop production and quality control, to marketing, financial management and business planning.

Many of the lessons I picked up from the tour and week-long internship have already pushed Hope Seeds & Perennials into the next stage. My plans include increasing my own acreage in production, expanding my trials and research gardens, and sourcing more quality organic seed from local producers. Part of this will be done through the Organic Seed Production workshop series at the upcoming ACORN conference in March. Three consecutive workshops will focus on commercial-scale organic seed production, exposing the possibilities and challenges the organic seed sector offers. For organic producers considering integrating seed production into their operations, you'll want to hear what these speakers – experts in their field – have to say.