



Why Choose Organic Seed?

By Andrea Berry

The seed catalogues that arrive in farmers and gardener's mailboxes each winter mark the start of the growing season ahead. Selecting seed for your farm's unique micro-conditions is a key ingredient to a successful crop. As organic growers, the options for choosing organic seed are growing, and there are many reasons to encourage choosing organic seed first.

Extending organic stewardship beyond your farm

As organic growers, we are stewards of the agricultural ecosystems that grow our food and livelihoods. Our scope of stewardship is broad, reaching beyond the plants and livestock that we raise. The soil, water and air; the diversity of soil biota and wildlife that pollinate, control pests and disease; these are some of the circles of influence we consider in our agricultural management. Minimizing our destructive impact to these cornerstones in organic systems is a key organic principle.

The seed you plant is one way of impacting these circles of influence. In conventionally managed agriculture, seed crops are not considered "food", allowing for longer and heavier chemical applications to manage pests, disease and fertility. This translates to increased chemical pressure on the ecosystem. Just as your own organic growing is more dynamic with diverse management tools, organically grown seed has been grown with the same guiding principles.

Seed crops need to complete their full life cycle, therefore they are often in the field or in a curing/cleaning process much longer than a fresh market crop. Consider lettuce: A fresh head of lettuce may be harvested from your greenhouse or field after 55-60 days of growing, whereas a lettuce seed crop reaches maturity in 90-120. The lettuce seed crop, therefore, has greater exposure to pest and disease pressure and needs nutrition for an extended period. Organic seed means less chemical inputs in the environment, and increased organic stewardship of our environment.

Natural resilience in the field

When plants are grown without the chemical crutch of conventional agriculture, they are encouraged to "fend for themselves". Root systems of organic plants are proven more robust as they reach further to scavenge for nutrition and water from compost and subsoil. More roots mean more stable plants, able to withstand wind and water pressure – hanging on to their place in the field in extreme weather. Organic plants are given the chance to express their natural and genetic resistance to pests and disease, rather than being masked by synthetic sprays. When seed crops are grown organically, this "field resilience" is stored in the genetics of the seed. The experiences in the field are "memorized" in the seed. Organic seed is then more adapted to produce plants that excel in organic growing conditions.

Purchasing power goes to breeding for organic systems

Spending your dollars on organic seed will encourage more plant breeding, variety improvement and selection for organic growing systems. As more seed companies realize the greater demand for organic seed, they'll do their best to bring more diversity in organic seed selection to their customers. As organic markets grow, public and private breeding programs are starting to see the economic reasoning for focusing on organic seed. Choosing organic seed is an essential part of turning the tides of seed and crop development from the shores of genetic modification (GMO). If growers demand organic, they'll get it!

When seed catalogues start to fill your mailbox next winter, consider the impact you can have by choosing organic seed.