



On-farm produced vegetable seeds and seedlings

Participatory seed-production: Propagation, Quality assurance, dissemination and organisational structure

Workshop in the frame of the LEONARDO DA VINCI partnership

“Growing agricultural biodiversity: knowledge and practice in Europe”

24th and 25 th of March 2014 at Gärtnerhof Ochsenherz in Gänserndorf



Franziska Lerch

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How exactly do I work with seeds?

- Teaching seed propagation in “ARCHE NOAH Seed Propagation Workshops”
- Working in seed propagation in the ARCHE NOAH gardens
- Working with farmers in PPB (participative plant breeding)

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

I am working and coordinating a group working in PPB to improve heirloom tomato varieties. My experiences are that exchange of cultivar experience, growing and cultivation strategies are very important for the members of the group. For breeding work we are learning all together step by step. We have no professional plant breeder in our group. We have the “knowledge of the group”. We started with variety screening and are continuing now with a specific selection of the most promising varieties. Pathogen strategies (disease management) are becoming a important part in the work (virus, Cladosporium fulvum in tunnels...).

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

- How to conserve seed quality and health when more farms are engaged in producing seeds?
- Whose „property“ are the developed varieties going to be?
- Structure of the group :
 - Association, farmers initiative...
 - Who coordinates/initiates (breeder, scientist, farmer)?
- Transfer of knowledge – how do farmers become breeders again?
- How to manage breeding work on farms (who is doing evaluation work, maintaining data, selection...)
- Financing

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Mara Müller

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How exactly do I work with seeds?

- I produce vegetable seeds on a small scale on my own farm
- I exchange seeds in the Arche Noah network („Sortenhandbuch)
- I am in charge of potatoe collection of the Arche Noah gene bank
- I am engaged in a LEADER projekt (see below)

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

- The goal of the project is to find out, which varieties of vegetables fit the demands of small scale farmers.
- This processs is performed together with farmers and consumers. For example different varieties of cucumber are cultivated by a participating farmer, their qualities compared and tested, if they are marketable.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

I am employed by ARCHE NOAH.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

- How is it possible to supply seeds in a good quality, especially in respect to seed health, within the farmers network?
- What ist the best way to organize the exchange of knowledge within the network and with experts form outside?
- How can the pool of knowledge and experience within the network be made available for each member?

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Rudolf Votzi

Bio Austria, Linz

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How exactly do I work with seeds?

I am organic farmer and seed producer. As management board member (deputy of the chairman) of Bio Austria I am concerned with seed issues (political matters).

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

As member of the Bio Austria managing board, I am responsible for the working group “Bauernparadeis”.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

- Project management and organisation of the leading team for the working group “Bauernparadeis”
- Needs of exchange regarding propagation of greening seeds

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Nicolás Stohandl
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How exactly do I work with seeds?

Propagation of rare herbal seeds, conservation breeding of salad („Grazer Krauthäuptel“, „Wieser Krauthäuptel“) and propagation of runner bean seeds („Käferbohnen“).

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

The exchange of rare seeds often has the disadvantage of little choice and low availability. Seeds often differ largely in quality concerning germination capacity and diseases. Eliminating and avoiding the spread of diseases and vermins is a major challenge.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

As experimental station, we are linked with many organisations, starting with herbal and vegetable gardening associations through to NGOs like Arche Noah.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

- Reduction of disease pressure from different origins without loss of quality.
- Proper methods for the treatment of seeds of sensitive crops also for organic farming.

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Kirsten Grover
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How exactly do I work with seeds?

At the moment, I am part of a group building up a concept and organisational form for a regional cooperative structure of seed work mainly in connection with the CSA-movement in Germany. I am not practically involved in the seed work, but looking forward to coming back to practice. I am also a participant of a training course on biodynamic seed breeding.

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

It's a very important and necessary strategy of maintaining the diversity of seeds and the cultural knowledge on the seeds. I see a big necessity in bringing the seed work back to the productional farms.

As we are just starting to organize, I don't have a lot of experiences to share so far, but I see that in most discussions – be it in the context of the future and development of the organic seed breeding sector or in more political discussions on seeds – we receive very good response with our concept, and recognition to move forward.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

I'm part of the coordination team in the German CSA Network and contact person for seed issues in there. I am doing the biodynamic seed breeding course which is organized by Kultursaat eV, the organisation of biodynamic seed breeders. We are just raising up connection with „Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft“, and we are connected with VERN and Dreschflegel.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

- Which kind of communicational and supporting/capacity building systems between the farms are needed?
- Which methods and techniques of quality management of the seeds are suitable for small farm systems?
- How to connect the processes of vegetable production with the processes of seed production (planning and organisation in time and space), difficulties and possible solutions?

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Max Rehberg

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Max Rehberg, born 1983 in Düsseldorf (Germany), BSc. in organic Agriculture. Member of Arche Noah and Initiativkreis für biologisch dynamische Saatgutarbeit. During and after his Studies work experiences on two different Dreschflegel farms, at Arche Noah and Getreidezüchtung Peter Kunz (cereal breeding, Switzerland).

Where am I situated – where is my farm?

WeidenHof, North Germany (80km to Hamburg, Bremen, Hannover), CSA Farm Cooperative with two families.

How exactly do I work with seeds?

We are producing seeds for our RegioSaatCoop Nord Network and for CULINARIS – Saatgut für Lebensmittel, a small organic seed company. At CULINARIS, I am also responsible for purchasing, and WeidenHof is one selection site for tomato breeding lines.

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

Participative seed production is not common at all in Germany. From my point of view, it is a big chance for more independence from seed companies, biodiversity, local adapted varieties (adapted to the climate as well as to the demand of consumers) and an important step towards food sovereignty in general. My experience with participative seed productions is still small and until now limited to private seed swaps, the foundation of RegioSaatCoop Nord and my work with organic seed companies like CULINARIS, Bingenheimer Saatgut AG etc. which are already unconventionally organized.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

I am member of Arche Noah and our farm is a CSA farm. I am founder member of the Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft (CSA Network in Germany) and the RegioSaatCoop initiative.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

I am very interested in getting to know other seed exchange networks. How are they organized? What kind of seed quality standards do they have? How do they deal with plant variety protection and the seed law in general? Are there any experiences with the EU Organic Certification System?

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Dorottya Kiss & Hunor Török

Bese Nature Conservation Society, Hungary

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Where am I situated – where is my farm?

We live and work in South-Borsod, Eastern Hungary.

How exactly do I work with seeds?

We work mainly with fruit tree propagation, but from this year on, we start to propagate vegetable seeds in small scale as well. Moreover, we are members of a Hungarian local NGO (Bese Nature Conservation Society) which set an aim: to protect and spread again the local and traditional plant (and livestock) varieties. Now, we provide consultancy about fruit trees, and also make connection between experts and local people.

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

Recently, together with the founder members of the Hungarian ‘Magház’ network, we like to establish an open group where the seed change is supported, and consequently the spread of old varieties is increased as well.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

Our seed-producing network is just starting now, but from the first steps we could provide fruit trees and later seed to change. We like to use especially Hungarian traditional species and varieties. The Bese Society provides the administrative background for the network.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

How does it work in Austria? Which are the basic steps to reach more people to join?

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Judit Czúcz
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Where am I situated – where is my farm?

Nagyszékely, South-West Hungary. Relatively dry, hilly region with loess bedrock.

How exactly do I work with seeds?

I am maintaining and propagating about 500 vegetable, herbal plant and fruit varieties. I share seeds and knowledge, organize and keep regularly seed-saving courses, join seed swaps and co-organize a community seed exchange program called Magház (Seed House, www.maghaz.hu).

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

In the village where I live, we have a seed community. We co-operate with each other in the maintenance of the varieties, for example sometimes we grow easily cross-pollinating plants together on one bigger plot. We visit each other's gardens during the summer and organize meetings during the winter in order to share experiences and seeds with each other. We have a seed bank, which is now an unused room, where we keep the seeds in jars under 12% humidity level. We share these seeds locally and countrywide as well. There is no system for this yet, but if somebody could propagate a variety, they can give back an amount of seeds with their own experiences about the variety to the seed bank. Since the Magház was founded in 2013, we don't have too many experiences with it.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

Magház is a virtual seed exchange network where everybody maintains their own seeds, which they can exchange with other members. That means that we don't have a central seed bank for Magház, everybody keeps their seeds at home. On the website, they can find information how they can save and store these seeds in a proper way. They can also find news about the upcoming events, like seed swaps, gardening and seed saving courses etc. Our aim with this website is to help people to find each other, to build personal contacts so they can meet, co-operate, share experiences, they can create local groups with local heirloom collections.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

I am interested in quality assurance of seeds and education ideas, techniques to make people more enthusiastic about proper gardening and seed saving.

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László Kiss

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Where am I situated – where is my farm?

My farm the Wheel of the Year Organic Farm (Évkerék Ökotanya, evkerek.blogspot.com) is located in the south of Hungary, close to the city of Szeged. It is a 7 ha organic farm (pasture, vegetable garden, fruit orchard).

How exactly do I work with seeds?

We have a vegetable garden with 150 species.

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

We have a CSA box scheme system. In our organic garden, we use 150 species, some of them are heirlooms. We try to save seeds from most of the plants. We organize every year a seed exchange in Szeged (including a seed exchange in 2011 at Let's Liberate Diversity Forum). In 2012, we decided to develop a community seed network called Magház (Seed House) together with other friends. Now we have a homepage, with a seed exchange function.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

We organize seed exchange, seed saving courses, vegetable varieties tastings...

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

I would like to know more practical than theoretical: seed saving in practice, how could it be good for the farmer also, what kind of criteria are expected in seed saving in this system?

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Orsolya Máthé

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Where am I situated – where is my farm?

I live and work in a small village called Bátor, near Eger in the North-East of Hungary. Our foundation consists of local farmers, inhabitants who work on food self-sustenance. Each member has his/her own garden or land, but we share works, seeds, resources.

How exactly do I work with seeds?

I am the programme manager of Witch-Farm Foundation (Banya Tanya, www.banya-tanya.hu) which supports farmers and urban people in growing their own healthy food. It means organizing seed exchanges, workshops on local seed propagation, community works, LETSsystem, vegetable box system (starting now in Eger). In my own garden, I grow as many local varieties as I could collect so far in the county. I've been involved in the Hungarian Permaculture Association, which means an expert resource of knowledge and seeds for my local community. Locally, I distribute my own propagated seeds, organize seed exchanges (approximately 2-4 times per year in the town of Eger and the villages nearby), plant exchanges, and workshops. I run a Facebook-group and a blog for wider distribution of our community's experiences.

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

I participated in events (seed exchanges, permaculture workshops, etc.) organized by the Permaculture Association. This led me to organize similar initiatives in my neighbourhood, which became a tradition in the last six years. More and more people grow their own seeds, and they need help in knowledge, seeds and information. This is what we give them in our region with my foundation. We also work with similar NGOs of the Northern region, exchanging experiences, building small networks to support each other.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

I am a member of the Hungarian informal permaculture Association, working with my foundation in regional partnerships. I also joined the team of "Magház" as a remote volunteer.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

How can we promote local varieties within the stricter and stricter legal regulations of seed propagation? I would like to bring other countries' good practices home in order to show my community that local seed propagation, local varieties are more sustainable than standardized ones. Living examples are the most convincing for down-to-earth farmers. I would like to learn about species, varieties that have wide durability in extreme climatic circumstances. In our experiences, they will be inevitable soon. Of course, I would be happy to exchange their seeds as well.

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Clare Pritchard Coventry, UK

Where am I situated – where is my farm?

Heritage Seed Library/Garden Organic, Coventry, UK

How exactly do I work with seeds?

As a grower/gardener at the Heritage Seed Library.

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

The Heritage Seed Library is involved in participatory seed production by conserving good quality open pollinated vegetable seed and making these seeds available to growers to grow, adapt and save seed as they wish. We also provide seed saving information and training to encourage and support people. My own experience is that I am involved in the initial growing of vegetables for seed for our own stock and helping to maintain the specific characteristics of each variety.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

We have a network of 170 volunteer growers ‘seed guardians’ who produce the majority of the seed for distribution and therefore are crucial to our existence. Seeds are distributed to members who pay an annual fee and choose a number of seeds from our catalogue.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

I’m really interested to see how systems of participatory seed production work in different seed saving organisations and find out the different ways of organising these systems.

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Louise Twigger Coventry, UK

Where am I situated – where is my farm?

Heritage Seed Library based at Garden Organic’s headquarters in Ryton on Dunsmore, near to Coventry in the UK.

How exactly do I work with seeds?

I am a seed officer responsible for coordinating the production of seed, distribution and conservation of our collection of about 7000 rare vegetable varieties.

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

I consider participatory seed production to be very positive for small-scale producers. Growers are able to have greater autonomy and choice of seed varieties to grow, selecting ones that meet their growing requirements. Community growing networks will enable suitable new varieties to be found and involve growers in selection. Seed production will be market-oriented, cost-effective, boost local seed markets and give people opportunity to start or improve commercial seed trading.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

The Heritage Seed Library has a network of 7000 members who are able to choose up to 6 heritage, heirloom and ex-commercial varieties per year, to grow, save the seed and share. Some members known as seed guardians grow varieties and save seed to return to us to replenish our stored seed and distribute. We also grow varieties on site to store and share with members.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

I am keen to learn from people’s personal experience of participatory seed production; the perceived benefits and limitations of this approach to producing seed.

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Claire Moore

Coventry, UK

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Where am I situated – where is my farm?

I work at the Heritage Seed Library near Coventry in England. My place is funded for a year by the Historic and Botanic Gardens Bursary Scheme and I am here to develop my horticultural skills.

How exactly do I work with seeds?

I am involved in the growing, harvesting, cleaning and packing of the seeds. I am also responsible for growing the display garden that is part of Ryton Gardens, which is open to the public and I will be looking at the benefits/difficulties of using mason bees as pollinators for protected crops.

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

Most of my experience is as an amateur grower/seed saver. My position at HSL is to develop this experience further. I have an interest in the history of the heritage seeds and the stories of the people who have grown them and are now growing them, effectively trying to answer that question.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

Through the Heritage Seed Library and Garden Organic.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

I would like to request a few seeds from the other participants in order to grow them in the display garden and highlight the work being done in seed saving across Europe.

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Adriana Esteban

Red Semillas de Murcia (Murcia)
Red de Semillas “Resembrando e Intercambiando” (Spain)

Where am I situated – where is my farm?

In Murcia, in the southeast of Spain. I’m a member of the Seed Network of Murcia which is located in CAID (Centro de Apoyo a la Investigación y el Desarrollo), in the University of Murcia.

How exactly do I work with seeds?

I belong to Seed Network of Murcia. We conserve and produce seeds of local varieties and facilitate the seed exchange with professional and amateur farmers.

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

We have two ways of obtaining seeds. One is in our garden where the volunteers work and where some projects of the University are developed. The other way is through our network members who are located in all the region and who bring us their own seeds twice a year. In order to try to obtain quality seeds, we make workshops about seed production at least twice a year.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

In our region, we are linked with different initiatives which develop seed saving activities. Furthermore, we are members of the Seed National Network (Red de Semillas “Resembrando e Intercambiando”) where we exchange information and experiences with other spanish local seed networks.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

- How do we protect the seed against patents?
- Which types of structures are the most suitable for the success of the participatory seed-production process?
- How can we guarantee seed’s quality?

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Laura Aceituno

Asociación La Troje (Sierra Norte de Madrid)

Red de Semillas “Resembrando e Intercambiando” (Spain)

Where am I situated – where is my farm?

In El Berrueco (Madrid, Spain), in a mountain area in the north of Madrid.

How exactly do I work with seeds?

I work in Asociación La Troje, as a researcher in ethnobotany, searching for landraces (fruit trees and horticultural varieties) and as a farmer producing seedlings and seeds to distribute among farmers (small scale production - direct commercialization).

My own experience/standpoint concerning participatory seed production?

In the first period of the association, we produced the seeds in a participatory homegarden network in the region. However, most of the gardeners participating were amateurs and the quality of the seeds was not always good. Therefore, we started producing the seeds only in two gardens dedicated exclusively to seed production, cared by experienced farmers. In the last year we started again a participatory seed-production network with a few gardeners reproducing bean varieties.

How am I organised in a network concerning seed production?

Besides the small farmer network in our region explained above, we participate in the Spanish federation Red de Semillas “Resembrando e Intercambiando”, where we exchange seeds and experiences among several regional networks all around Spain.

Which questions and needs of exchange do I have concerning participatory seed production?

- Control of the quality and sanity of the seeds
- Organisational structure of participatory seed production
- Legal issues:
 - If we sell seeds as an association, what legal problems do we face?
 - How to maintain landraces as a common good, but protect them from being patented?

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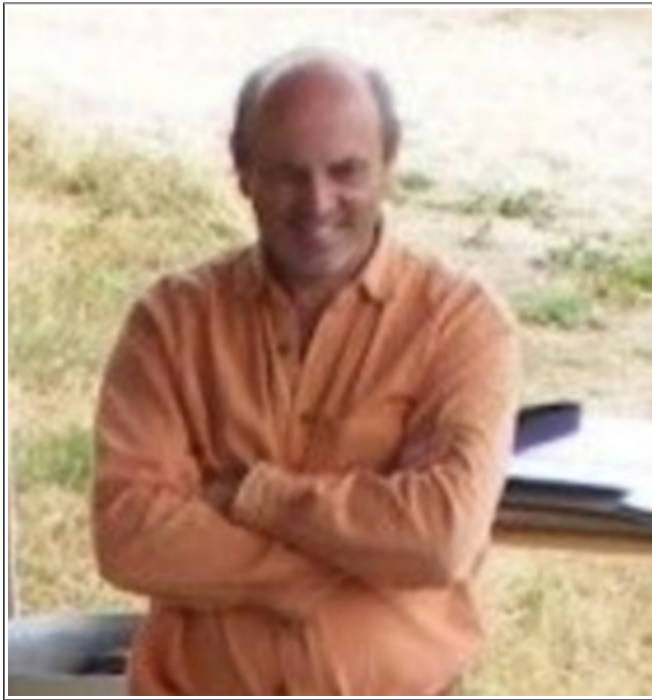
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Philippe Catinaud

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I am a producer of vegetable seeds in Montpezat in south-western France. As a member of Biau Germe, a formation of farmers from different backgrounds, we share our working strength and experience with the soil for producing seeds. Seed production is realized on a set of 10 farms within a 20 km radius around Montpezat d'Agenais. (Moreover, some of them have other agricultural activities like sheep, plums...) Each producer is responsible for a number of varieties of vegetables, flowers, herbs and green manures available in our catalog.

At the end of the summer, we come together in the house of Biau Germe for cleaning seeds, germination tests, packing, shipping orders as well as secretarial work and accounting. Our seed is well managed and made available to our customers by all those involved in the adventure, each according to his skills!

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Christophe Collini

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I am located near Guingamp in the wood of Avaugour on a area of 3.5 hectares, including 1.2 hectares of cultivated land, with the rest being natural orchard of 52 varieties (0.5 Ha), wood and natural wild prairie (0.7 ha) and a classified wetland (0.8 Ha), all polinated by 9 hives (black bees from Ouessant). We grow 850 vegetable varieties and we constantly search for taste qualities when choosing the varieties and their growing characteristics. Therefore, in the first quarter of 2014, we created an association (Le Conservatoire du Goût), whose aim is to search, select and make available high quality taste varieties for vegetable growers (with botanical, agricultural and culinary information). We have just signed an agreement with the island of Saint Riom (sea of Paimpol, micro climate) to cultivate selected varieties (early potatoe Duck with pink flesh, a Japanese onion) and participate in the selection and multiplication of new varieties yet to be tested. Today, our relation to seeds remains limited to the following species: cabbages (“Lorient” and “pointu de Douarnenez”), tomatoes (310 varieties), eggplants (24 varieties), peppers (5 varieties), salad, beans, and some varieties of sprouts (Mitsuba, Cresson Persia, TsaiTsai, Amaranth of Mexico...)

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