

Keepers of the Seeds

Native farmers and gardeners are working to preserve their agricultural heritage

By: Winona LaDuke

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For 14 years, Caroline Chartrand, a Metis woman who recently traveled from Winnipeg, Canada, to the 8th annual Great Lakes Indigenous Farming Conference, has been looking for the heritage seeds of her people. It is believed that in the 1800s, the Metis grew some 120 distinct seed varieties in the Red River area of Canada. Of those, Caroline says, "We ended up finding about 20 so far."

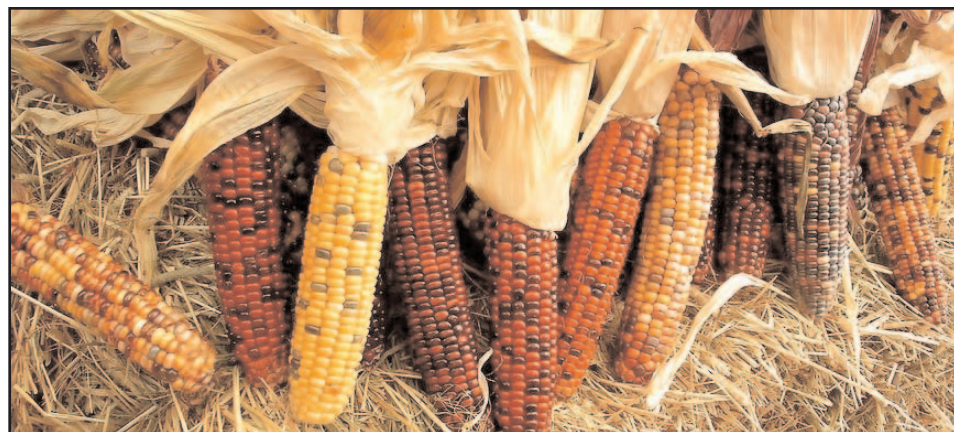
In Canada, three-quarters of all the crop varieties that existed before the 20th century are extinct. And, of the remaining quarter, only 10 percent are available commercially from Canadian seed companies (the remainder are held by gardeners and families). Over 64 percent of the commercially held seeds are offered by only one company; if those varieties are dropped, the seeds may be lost.

They now preserve and grow out over 25,000 varieties of unique vegetables, fruits, and grasses.

That's the reason Caroline and about 100 other indigenous farmers and gardeners — along with students and community members — gathered in March on the White Earth reservation in Northern Minnesota to share knowledge, stories, and, of course, seeds.

In Canada, three-quarters of all the crop varieties that existed before the 20th century are extinct. A recent article by a prominent Canadian writer suggested that agriculture in Canada began with the arrival of Europeans. Caroline had to ask her, "What about all that agriculture before then?"

Caroline is a committed grower in the effort to recover northern Ojibwe



corn varieties that once grew 100 miles north of Winnipeg — the northernmost known corn crop in the world. "That's some adaptable corn," said one of the conference participants said. "And," added Betsy McDougall of Turtle Mountain, "We Ojibwes, Metis, and Crees must have been really good farmers."

Indigenous farmers from the Winnebago reservation in Nebraska shared their struggles with genetically modified organisms (GMOs) encroaching on their fields, threatening to alter and potentially sterilize open-pollinated corn. While native corn varieties are richer in protein and much more resilient to climate change, they are not immune to GMO contamination. The advice shared amongst farmers was to eat from the edges and save seed from the middle, where corn is least likely to be affected by cross-pollination. The experiences of our ancestors offer us wisdom for surviving today's crises.

Despite the challenges, native farmers are having success in preserving the resilient crops that sustained their ancestors.

"Those seeds are the old ways. They

gave our ancestors life for all those years," said Frank Alegria, Sr. The son of migrant farm workers, Frank has been gardening since he could walk and farming on the Menominee reservation in Wisconsin since he was sixteen. Now an elder, he continues to grow native varieties, including an 850-year-old squash variety found in an archaeological dig near the Wisconsin border.

Deb Echohawk told the story of the sacred corn seeds of the Pawnee. By combining efforts with the descendants of settlers who live in the traditional Pawnee homelands in Nebraska, the Pawnee are recovering varieties thought to be lost forever. Deb and others have been formally recognized as keepers of the seeds.

John Torgrimson, executive director of Seed Savers Exchange, the nation's largest non-governmental seed bank, talked about the organization's humble beginning as a campout by a small group of committed individuals in Decorah, Iowa. More than 35 years later, they now preserve and grow out over 25,000 varieties of unique vegetables, fruits, grasses, and even a heritage cow breed at their 890 acre Heritage Farm. (continued on pg. 11)



Likewise, the White Earth Land Recovery Project, together with North Dakota State University, is working with a number of tribal members and local farmers to grow out five or six corn varieties adapted for the region, including white, pink, and black varieties. One farmer chuckled as he mentioned seeing animals strut past the more abundant GMO corn to feast on the native variety.

One of the outcomes of the conference was a working group that will plan a regional seed library. At the table were tribal members from White Earth, Red Lake, Leech Lake, Bad River, Menominee, Standing Rock Lakota, the Winnebago of Nebraska, and other reservations, as well as the Pawnee tribe's keeper of seeds and the executive directors of Seed Savers Exchange and Seeds of Diversity (Canada). Many others joined the discussion, including a Midwest coordinator for USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, local allied growers, representatives from University of Minnesota, and various tribal colleges.

If you'd like to take part in the ongoing discussion and visioning of a Great Lakes Seed Library, send an email to: northern-indigenous-seed-sovereignty@googlegroups.com



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Family Farm Defenders Seek Nominees for THE JOHN KINSMAN Beginning Farmer Food Sovereignty Prize



Family Farm Defenders, a national farmer and consumer advocacy group, known and based in Wisconsin for espousing the principles of food sovereignty is seeking to give a cash award to a beginning farmer who best up holds those principles. The award is named in honor of FFD's founder and long time activist, John Kinsman.

FFD is a national and international leader in the Food Sovereignty movement. Last year FFD was awarded the Food Sovereignty Prize by the Community Food Security Coalition. Food sovereignty encompasses seven principles — food as a basic right, agrarian reform, protecting natural resources, reorganizing food trade, ending the globalism of hunger, social peace and the democratic control of agricultural policies.

FFD President, John Kinsman, has said that, "The seven principles of food sovereignty are the finest recipe for global food, social and environmental justice that exist today. Food sovereignty can enhance the dignity of every person in the world, and these principles now inspire and guide Family Farm Defenders in all our plans and actions."

The Family Farm Defenders is starting the John Kinsman Beginning Farmer Food Sovereignty Prize to encourage young farmers to adhere to the principles of food sovereignty as they begin their careers in agriculture.

Nominations of beginning farmers are due by June 10, 2011. Once the farmers have been nominated a FFD member will contact the farmer for supporting information. Selected farmer(s) will be notified in early October and receive their award at a reception and dinner at The Goodman Center in Madison, Wisconsin on November 12, 2011.

Information regarding nominee criteria and how to nominate a farmer, can be found at the FFD website, www.familyfarmdefenders.org. More information regarding the reception and dinner will be posted on the website as the event nears.