



Photo Credit: Shelby Lisk

What is Seed Saving and Why is it Important?

Seed Saving

Seed saving is the process of harvesting and storing seeds to eventually grow future crops. Many Indigenous communities have practiced seed saving for generations. **First Nations Development Institute** shares that seed saving was a necessity for Indigenous communities in the past, due to the reliance that many communities had on crops for food, as well as the important role that certain crops played in social and cultural practices. The significance of plants in Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee culture is reflected in the teachings and the presence of plants in stories and ceremonies. In her essay, “Seeds of the Spirit: A Call to Spiritual Action for Mother Earth A Haudenosaunee Reflection”, Kahontakwas Diane Longboat shares that:

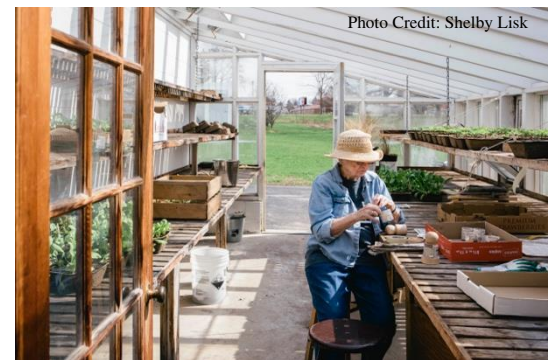


Photo Credit: Shelby Lisk

“Plant seeds contain the story of creation, the spiritual law for the continuance of life, the natural law for relationship with the sun, winds, air, water, rains, microorganisms, minerals of the soil, and other companion plants... Their integrity is the inherited legacy for the generations of the unborn. It is our duty to return the seeds to the coming generations in the same state as the seeds were gifted to us.”

(Shiva et al., 2014).

The Haudenosaunee Creation Story tells us how important plants, including the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash) grew from the body of Sky Woman’s daughter, revealing the strong **cultural and spiritual connection** that Haudenosaunee communities have to seeds and planting. The Anishinaabe also have many crops that carry **social and cultural importance**. The strawberry plant, ode’imin or heart-berry, is a medicine that has many teachings and stories associated with it, including teachings of creation, community, and love.

What are the Benefits of Seed Saving?



Photo Credit: Shelby Lisk

- Helps to preserve the genetic diversity of seeds
- Having a wide variety of seeds increases the ability of crops to overcome diseases and environmental changes
- Helps to ensure there are protected seeds that are ready to be planted if disasters eliminate entire crops
- Preserves culture and community connections to the land



Seeds are often said to have a **connection to the past, as well as a connection to the future**. Seed saving plays an especially important role in Indigenous communities, as this practice helps to keep heirloom/ancestral seeds alive and is also a means of protecting histories, cultural traditions, and connections to future generations.

The Importance of Seed Saving

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer notes, “**In Indigenous agriculture, the practice is to modify the plants to fit the land. As a result, there are many varieties of corn domesticated by our ancestors, all adapted to grow in many different places. Modern agriculture, with its big engines and fossil fuels, took the opposite approach: modify the land to fit the plants, which are frighteningly similar clones**” (Kimmerer, 2013, pg. 138).

The genetic information of many of our seeds has been changed over time. Given the prevalence of monoculture farming, currently only 150 crops make up the majority of food that is grown and consumed by humans worldwide. The Food and Agriculture Organization also reveals that **three-quarters of the biodiversity in crops has been lost within the last century**. This low biodiversity and lack of genetic variations in the majority of crops has led biologists to be concerned about these crops being highly **vulnerable** to new or inadvertently introduced diseases. This concern is furthered as the lack of genetic resources in these crops also inhibits biologists from being able to breed new varieties that could combat these diseases. With this, saving a wide variety of seeds and the use of seed banks emerges as an important “insurance policy for the future of agriculture and plant science” (*Seed Banks* 2021).



Night Garden by
Kahèhtoktha Janice Brant

Seed Banks

Seed banks are locations where seed collections are stored, allowing their genetic diversity to be preserved. These locations are designed with ideal conditions that will help to safely store the seeds, including having a constant temperature and humidity. When storing seeds, it is important to record the location that the seed was collected from as well as any information about the seed variety.



Seeds are typically kept in a cool and dry space to prevent them from rotting or sprouting and are occasionally planted to grow new crops, which will produce new seeds for the seed bank. Seed banks also store plants that are grown from tubers or rhizomes, such as potatoes or yams. These crops often need to be replanted more frequently than the stored seeds.

Local Seed Saving and Seed Sanctuary History

1970s- Napanee farmers, Carol and Robert Mouck, began an heirloom seed collection with the crops on their property, Foxfire Farm.

1999- Nearing retirement, Carol and Robert Mouck partnered with the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul to create the **Heirloom Seed Sanctuary** and move the almost 400 seed varieties saved by the Moucks to the Sisters of Providence property in Kingston.



2011- KASSI (Kingston Area Seed System Initiative) is formed, resulting from a proposal by local farmers and gardeners. KASSI seeks to promote sustainable local food production and increase seed sovereignty in the Kingston Area.

2018- Last growing season of the seeds in the Heirloom Seed Sanctuary collection. Kenhté:ke Seed Sanctuary & Learning Center is established.

2019- As the Sisters of Providence prepare for renovations, the seed collection in the Heirloom Seed Sanctuary is given to **KASSI** and the **Ratinenhayén:thos**, a group of seed farmers in Kenhetè:ke-Tyendinega Mohawk Territory. The Ratinenhayén:thos, “they are the seed farmers”, emerged as a volunteer group who took responsibility of caring for this seed collection, which is now stored at the Kenhte:ke Seed Sanctuary and Learning Centre.



Watch the following video of Ratinenhayén:thos members talk about the rematriated seed collection:

[Ratinenhayén:thos - they are the seed farmers:](https://rb.gy/8wn6l)

<https://rb.gy/8wn6l>



Seed Rematriation Ceremony- April 2019:

The **Passing of the Seeds wampum belt** was created to represent the agreement and story of the rematriation of the collection of heirloom seeds from the Sisters of Providence to the Ratinenhayén:thos. The two human forms are each extending their hands off of the wampum belt, signifying that others can join in this process of protecting and caring for these seeds.



Passing of the Seeds Wampum Belt
Photo Credit: Kenhte:ke Seed
Sanctuary and Learning Centre

Kahètoktha Janice Brant shares,

“There’s a line of seeds that go between the two human figures, and in the centre, a couple of the seeds are shown dropping down into a hill or a mound, so that it’s not just the seeds that are being passed on, but it’s the act of planting, it’s the act of doing and caring for these seeds that’s being passed on as well - the skills, the knowledge, the cosmology of the way that we plant and why, [the] songs that are sung, [the] recipes, and the ceremonies that uphold the different foods that we have was all part of that learning and part of that thinking, and all woven into the wampum belt that was created to mark the rematriation ceremony”

(Brant, 2022).



For more information, and to hear Kahètoktha Janice Brant (a Tyendinaga Mohawk artist, teacher, and seedkeeper) share the story of creating a new home for these heirloom seeds and the importance of seed rematriation, visit [Passing The Seeds: A Seed Rematriation Story: https://rb.gy/ywfyv](https://rb.gy/ywfyv)

Seed rematriation is the process of returning seeds to their place of origin. Drawing on the word “repatriation”, which is used to describe the process of returning items back to Indigenous peoples, rematriation has a connection to Mother Earth and also brings attention to the women’s role in caring for these seeds.

Seed Sovereignty

Seed sovereignty explores the nature of seed ownership and addresses the right of a farmer to save, plant, and exchange their own seeds. However, the majority of seeds are currently the property of major corporations (some of which choose to genetically manipulate their seeds to ensure that their crop will not produce fertile



seeds). As these commercial corporations begin to claim ownership over these seeds, it becomes more difficult for local farmers and Indigenous communities to engage in the process of seed saving and preserving the crops that have been generationally cultivated and cared for in their communities. Kahontakwas Diane Longboat shares that **“No Nation can be self-determining if they are dependent on outside sources to feed their people”** (Shiva et al., 2014).

Indigenous food sovereignty recognizes that Indigenous food systems are highly place-based and reflect the reciprocal relationship that communities have with the land and their crops. Seed saving and creating seed banks are critical steps to achieve this sovereignty and cultural protection within Indigenous communities. These steps will help to ensure that communities can continue to grow and maintain their local seeds.



Artists Featured

Shelby Lisk- a Kanyen'kehá:ka (Mohawk) photographer, filmmaker, and journalist with roots in Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory

Kahèhtoktha Janice Brant- a Kanyen'keha:ka (Mohawk) artist from Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory