## Saving seeds for the future

The story goes that the Brighstone bean, which produces purple flowers and long green pods marked with dark patches, first came to Britain after its seeds were salvaged from a shipwreck over a century ago. Still today you see the bean growing in allotments and gardens up and down the country.

There was once a culture of saving seeds among growers and farmers across the world. Although many communities still practice seed saving, in the UK this practice has all but disappeared.

Today, three companies control about half of all seeds grown globally. It's come at a price: the world has lost about <u>75% of its crop diversity</u> in the last 100 years.

"A few generations ago people used to save seed. Farmers were able to cultivate seeds that worked well in their climate and with their soil and local growing conditions. But what we've seen in the past few generations is a real consolidation of power in the seed market," says Sinéad Fortune, programme manager at Seed Sovereignty UK, an organisation that supports local seed saving and swapping.

Seed saving allows for greater crop diversity. The hybrid seeds that dominate the commercial seed market have been developed to boost beneficial plant characteristics but at the detriment of diversity – which is vital for the sustainability of our food systems. Crop diversity creates natural resilience which allows for recovery from challenges like new strains of disease or climate change.

"As our planet becomes more unpredictable, and the kind of dramatic events that we're getting become more likely and more frequent, we need seeds and we need crops that can stand up to that," says Fortune.

"Seed saving can help tackle the impacts of climate change on our food systems," says David Price of the Seed Co-operative. Open pollinated seeds – seeds that are saved – "are part of the solution because they are resilient and able to adapt."

Many <u>seeds produced</u> on a mass industrialized scale are hybrids: more constrained and less able to adapt.

Now initiatives across the UK are trying to encourage local seed saving and exchanges within the community.

Interest in seeds has spiked dramatically as the world began to face the global pandemic. In the first few weeks of lockdown, supermarket shelves were empty as shoppers across the UK stocked up in panic. "If you go to the supermarket and the shelves are empty, you start questioning, well, where does my food come from? It made people realise how vulnerable our food system actually is," says

Fortune. "The only way of really addressing that is to localise it and rescale to support sustainable food production." And to do that you need a good seed, she adds.

The Seed Co-operative, which grows, processes and sells organic, open-pollinated seed across the country, saw a 600% increase in orders in March compared to the previous year.

"I think people have become more conscious of the fact that they need to be resilient," says Price. "Seed saving is a really good example of how that can work."



'The food revolution starts with seed.' Naomi Larsson.

"The food revolution starts with seed," says Fortune. "Your seed has to be grown in a fair and ethical and an agroecological way. If your seed has been shipped from abroad, grown in a monoculture, doused with pesticides and artificial fertilizers, how do you expect it to thrive in other conditions?"

"[Seed saving] is a whole different economy, a whole different approach to life, feeling like you're taking a stake in your own future for a much higher degree," Price adds.

The global food system contributes to a <u>quarter of greenhouse gas emissions</u>. If richer countries vastly change this industry we may be able to stop agriculture <u>contributing to global warming</u>.

"Seed saving encourages a different type of farming," says Price. "It's human scale farming as opposed to huge mechanized farming systems, and the way the soil is managed is completely different. Soil has a capacity to lock up huge amounts of carbon. If you're operating in an organic system where you're building soil carbon the whole time that provides part of the solution to climate change."

Fortune has been growing and gardening for years. She has a special love for seeds. "They're the most amazing things: something that given the right conditions, can produce life and can fortify and strengthen people and animals in the ecosystem as a whole. It's a great honour to be a part of that wider system."