



Seed Savers

By Monroe S. Miller

Ask nearly anyone involved in field agriculture and you will learn two of their favorite events are planting and harvest. Usually those events define their favorite seasons, too - spring and fall.

The key component of planting is, obviously, the seed. Every one is a miracle of an enormous order. From microscopic to substantial, from bland to colorful, they are the basis of life on earth.

Seeds have always interested me; from farm kid to UW student who worked (where else?) at the Department of Agronomy seeds building, I have been intrigued by seeds. Giant pumpkins and horsechestnuts may have been the most fun to grow. One of the most interesting stories I have investigated and developed for a *GRASS ROOTS* article was ten years ago when I wrote about Professor Beal and his creative seed viability experiments at Michigan State University over a century ago.

Obviously, seeds are a keystone to the business of a golf course superintendent. Seeds are how, at one time or another, courses came into being. The seed industry

has a significant visibility in our business, at meetings and conferences and in ads on the pages of our chapter publication. Any full service turf distributor has a seed business.

Progress in cultivar and variety characteristics has had a huge and positive impact on golf course turf, and those characteristics are transmitted maternally, through seeds. In addition to that, seed technology has given us pre-germinated seed, seed coated with fungicides and endophytes. We cannot even guess what biotechnology will give us in the future, even the near future.

But what happens to the old varieties? Can you still buy them? What if an old variety was especially well suited to a niche or performed exceptionally well in limited areas - are old varieties available on a limited basis? Mostly, they are not.

The same question is asked, on a scale that dwarfs the grass seed business, when it comes to flowers and fruits and vegetables and herbs. What happens to heirloom varieties of tomatoes and apples and sunflowers? Once



The view of Heritage Farm as you drive the entrance road.



SSE headquarters building, located above the farmstead. This is a front view.



The backside of SSE headquarters overlooks the farm buildings below.

new introductions are made, do old ones disappear?

Well, not far from us is an organization that is dedicated to the preservation and distribution of handed-down and heirloom varieties of herbs, flowers, grains, fruits and vegetables. The organization is the Seed Savers Exchange, and it is located just a bit north of Decorah, Iowa.

Seed Savers is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1975 by Kent and Diane Whealy, a couple that is still operating the organization today. SSE has grown dramatically in 25 years (almost!) and today has over 8,000 members. The headquarters is a beautiful old farm which is known as Heritage Farm. Its 170 acres are not at all different from a similar farm in southwest Wisconsin; the area is rolling and dappled with wooded lands. Most think of Iowa as flat; parts of it are. But the northeast corner of the state escaped the glaciers, too, resulting in very scenic landscape.

The farm buildings sit in valley floor, gardens are all around and on back from the entrance road. There is a spring-fed pond past the barn, and a stream runs along the west limestone bluff and on through the property. I climbed up the east bluff - I have never overcome my



Co-founders Kent and Diane Whealy in the Heritage Farm Gardens.

interminable nosiness - and came upon a building on the top of the bluff that was a complex of offices and meeting rooms. It was fairly new and located next to what were obviously seed processing and storage buildings.

I went in, introduced myself to some very nice people, looked through all their mail order offerings and went back outside. A pasture next to the lawn of the headquarters building had some odd looking cattle grazing in it; they hadn't been dehorned and the lyre-shaped horns were black-tipped. They had all white coats and black noses, ears and hooves. I went back in, inquired about them and found out they were White Park Cattle from the British Isles. They were there before the time of Christ but now only a few hundred remain worldwide. The Heritage Farm has about 30 of them in their herd. They are preserving cattle as well as seeds!

But the Seed Savers real mission is saving antique garden plant seeds from extinction. The focus is mainly on those varieties that were brought to America with your ancestors and mine when they immigrated. Since 1975, over 750,000 samples of rare and endangered seeds not



Screened cages prevent insects from cross-pollinating certain crops.



Fields follow the narrow valley behind the farmstead.

available commercially have been distributed and therefore saved from loss forever. Better yet, old varieties become available to other seed savers. Seeds maintained by isolated gardeners and farmers, some literally since the Mayflower, were being lost simply because there are fewer farmers, fewer ethnic enclaves and even fewer gardeners each year. It seems to me that the SSE started just in the nick of time, saving valuable genetic treasures.

The valley, with the house and barn at its entrance, is where I saw most of the flower and vegetable and herb gardens and the fields. On the upland meadow away from the steep limestone bluff is the historic orchard. In 1900, there were 7,000 varieties of apples in the U.S. Today, half of the 7,000 are extinct and the rest are dying rapidly. Seed Savers is attempting to



The barnyard is even utilized in plant preservation. The barn is used as a meeting place (left), store and seed processing.



Flowers and veggies share space in this late season garden at Seed Savers.

half this loss through development of the most diverse public orchard in the U.S. They have 700 different apples, most of them 19th century varieties, on display. More are to come.

The preservation gardens are the real site to behold at Heritage Farm. Imagine: more than 18,000 rare vegetables are being maintained. That includes 4,100 tomatoes, 3,600 beans, 1,200 peppers, 1,000 squash, 900 peas, 850 lettuces, 400 melons, 200 garlics, and so on. Each summer up to 2,000 endangered varieties are multiplied for seed, about 10% of each crop on a ten-year rotation. Flowers and herbs are grown in lesser numbers, but members exchange nearly 3,000 varieties of old time flowers and herbs each year, varieties that once bloomed in our ancestors yards and gardens.

The SSE is supported by memberships, a summer convention, catalog sales of seeds and garden gifts. It is an extremely worthy cause, one you can immerse yourself in because it is so close to Wisconsin. Plus, Decorah, Iowa is home to Luther College, the Vesterheim Museum of Norwegian/American history, and is close to Spillville, Iowa, a Chezk village where Antonin Dvorak spent part of a year with his family long ago and where he wrote some of the world's most beautiful classic music. All of this is a short drive from Wisconsin, perfect for a day trip or a weekend vacation. ♣