



The Seed Underground: A Growing Revolution to Save Food

Janisse Ray

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There is no despair in a seed. There's only life, waiting for the right conditions-sun and water, warmth and soil-to be set free. Everyday, millions upon millions of seeds lift their two green wings.

At no time in our history have Americans been more obsessed with food. Options- including those for local, sustainable, and organic food-seem limitless. And yet, our food supply is profoundly at risk. Farmers and gardeners a century ago had five times the possibilities of what to plant than farmers and gardeners do today; we are losing untold numbers of plant varieties to genetically modified industrial monocultures. In her latest work of literary nonfiction, award-winning author and activist Janisse Ray argues that if we are to secure the future of food, we first must understand where it all begins: the seed.

The Seed Underground is a journey to the frontier of seed-saving. It is driven by stories, both the author's own and those from people who are waging a lush and quiet revolution in thousands of gardens across America to preserve our traditional cornucopia of food by simply growing old varieties and eating them. *The Seed Underground* pays tribute to time-honored and threatened varieties, deconstructs the politics and genetics of seeds, and reveals the astonishing characters who grow, study, and save them.

The Seed Underground: A Growing Revolution to Save Food Details

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From Reader Review The Seed Underground: A Growing Revolution to Save Food for online ebook

Kitten Kisser says

"This is not a textbook on seed saving. I am looking to inspire you with my own life." - Janisse Ray

I believe this excerpt taken from the introduction sums up the book rather well. Each chapter is a story in the authors life. A story about different types of seeds & the individuals involved in each seed. The story for each seed although different is essentially the same - the story behind the seed. The importance of saving seed. The dangers of genetically engineered seed & corporations rather than individual rights to seeds.

When I first began to read I was enthralled. In nearly every page or two I found I wanted to post quotes from the author. The importance of seeds resonates deeply within me. I run a small organic family farm so seed saving, digging in the dirt & GM avoidance are of intense interest to me.

The disappointing part of this book is that except for a few spots, you will not learn much about the how of seed saving. There is a good chapter for hand pollination of my favorite pumpkin the Musque de Provence. But as the author freely admits, this is not a book about how to save seed, it is a book about her passion & love of seeds. If you are searching for a book to instruct you on the hows, this is not the book you want. If you want to be inspired to save your own seed, this might work for you. I say might because even for me, lover of dirt, sun & seeds it got a little tiresome. Another story about another seed & someones opinion on seeds.

Even though this is not my favorite book, I couldn't give it a lower rating because of the message it contains. The message is pure. The message is good. It is as sweet as a brand new day in its utter simplicity. If we don't take back our seeds, learn what our great grandparents knew, we may loose our seeds forever. Seeds shouldn't be owned & patented by corporations. They should be freely shared & traded. Local organic seeds are better than packaged seeds as they have adapted to your environment. The seed. So simple. So pure. It's all about the seeds & how we must protect them & in turn ourselves.

If after reading this book, you find yourself inspired to start your own seed saving journey, the author provides a section on resources. Listing organizations, publications, Suppliers & more.

Patti Borneman says

I loved this book and highly recommend it. Janisse Ray will be in Helena, at the invitation of Cultivate Helena, to read from it. She's currently in Missoula as the William Kittredge Visiting Writer and will give a reading at the Lewis and Clark Library on March 11 at 7 pm. More info at <http://www.cultivatehelena.com>.

Todd Wheeler says

Part memoir, part exploration of the seed saving community, Ray's book spans a century where seed variety for our foods has shrunk dramatically. The main cause is the bottom line greed of multi-national corporations

that want to control seed stock and their genes, not for better food but for more profit.

There is hope. Like the explosion of interest in CSA's and locavores, interest in regional seed saving and swapping is reviving. For example several towns in Maine have passed ordinances described as "food sovereignty" to take local control of the sale of local goods "like fresh milk or locally slaughtered meat." p. 168

One chapter describes how to save seeds from a tomato, a deceptively easy process of leaving the 'goop' in a mason jar to ferment for some days. The fermentation and mold remove chemicals that can prohibit the seeds from growing. Best tried with local heirloom varieties; the hybrid/GMO tomatoes from the supermarket won't grow from those seeds. They are designed not to.

My favorite quote from the book:

"Like seed, each of us has traits hidden deep inside that under the right conditions can emerge. ... We can become something even stronger and more useful than we were before." p.67

Scot says

Janisse Ray is likely the best nature writer of this generation! She combines a knowledge and passion for the environment with a down-home view of the culture and the people working in their own ways to protect it.

The Seed Underground is no exception - I laughed, I cried, I was inspired and enraged. I saw a passion for seeds and plants that was not cultivated through a microscope but through front porch conversations, walks in a garden, and in gatherings with others who shared that passion.

There is some valuable information in here on how to be a seed saver yourself, but more importantly, it is a call to be in touch with the world around us and to resist its commodification.

Highly recommended for gardeners or would be gardeners, plant lovers, nature-ophiles, and anyone who likes a good story and is open to a deeper dive into the world around them.

Jenny says

This book contains some interesting stories and some good information about collecting, preserving and saving seeds. It has been criticized for being inadequately fact checked and I was disappointed in the amount of technical information that was provided without specific references or footnotes. Some of the people put forward as scientific experts are well respected experts, others do work that is questionable but all are treated the same way by the author as long as their information fits the argument that she is making at the moment.

Her experiences on her own farm are interesting and her enthusiasm for collecting and preserving seeds to grow heirloom varieties of different food plants is evident in her writing. Some of her history is suspect -- writers and social commentators have been bemoaning the death of the American small town and migration from town to city since the 19th century, and the agrarian economy that Thomas Jefferson touted was supported by slave labor. The author's efforts to grow her own food and reduce her personal carbon footprint are noble but ignores the larger challenge involved in feeding all of the people in the world today a nutritious

diet as climate change is making that task even more challenging.

Marsha says

Interesting book! She might be a little extreme for me, but I learned a lot, and will look at seeds, and my food sources, with a new eye from now on.

Stephie Jane Rexroth says

"'The system is so broken,' she said. Not only broken, but destructive and self-destructive.' By 'system,' I figured she meant the agricultural or food system. Maybe she meant the entire political system. But I didn't ask. I just listened. 'I see in activism a kind of futility,' she said, brown eyes sincere. 'The real power is in doing. The real power is in making the system irrelevant. That means nonparticipation in the existing broken system.'... Sylvia wasn't protesting anything in her peaceful garden: 'What I am doing is making a broken system irrelevant.'"

Deanna says

Beautifully written book about the importance of seed saving. Includes some very basic information on how to do it. Ended up jealous of Ray's Georgia gardening season and determined to try saving some seed this year.

Laura says

Lovely book, especially enjoyed the opening section as well as some of the stories of certain seeds and the author's childhood. My first thoughts on reading was that it was refreshing to read a well-written (literary-speaking) non-fiction book about seeds/food. A little too political for me at times. Fantastic section in the back about saving seeds and resources.

Monica says

This book was amazing. It totally cemented my determination to get involved in saving and growing seeds as part of ensuring the future of our food diversity and security.

Rick Jackofsky says

A foreboding, yet optimistic, look at the current state and future of agriculture in the age of genetic modification. This book is mostly a collection of amusing and inspirational anecdotes about saving heirloom

seeds intending to inspire others to join the "Growing Revolution." The resource section contains a fairly extensive list of seed saving groups, publications, and seed suppliers.

Christopher says

'Putting the culture back into agriculture', is mentioned somewhere in the book, which is an apt summary for The Seed Underground. The basic idea is that every seed and seed variety carries the story of the people who bred and planted it. As seeds are lost or become homogenized, those stories are lost, and the authors main goal is as much culture saving as it is seed saving. While I liked this book and it is sprinkled with great little insights, the 3-star rating reflects that it reads like a string of rambling blog posts and could have used more thought about the overall structure of the book and its message, and less repetitive flowery prose.

Mark says

Ms. Ray entrails with her storytelling. When waxing about dirt, tomato varieties or white trash, she is unparalleled. When preaching however...she just sounds like everybody else. Which means she comes across as "everything sucks except the things that I say don't suck". If I wanted to hear that I would just turn on CNN. But there was just enough down to earth storytelling to keep me enthralled.

Teresa McCarthy says

A good primer on the issues around seed diversity, but what I especially love are the stories she tells of the farmers she meets and the seed varieties she's come across. I'll be using her method to save some seeds from the heritage pink tomato I've got growing in my garden this year. And she's inspired me to share more of my great-aunt Vivienne's bean seeds, which her family brought from Belgium generations ago and have been growing in Manitoba and British Columbia ever since.

J.S. Green says

Home gardeners are increasingly turning to "heirloom" varieties of plants. Whether it's to remember flowers their parents or grandparents kept or to find better tasting vegetables, it's a growing movement of sorts. And Ms. Ray recites (several times) statistics of how many varieties are no longer available - and the numbers are disconcerting. Seed companies have bred hybrids to the point where a gardener cannot save seeds from one year to the next and have them grow true. Even more distressing, companies have turned to genetically-modified (GM) crops that have genetic traits artificially inserted for resistance to pests or - alarmingly - chemical herbicides. Ray argues that we have lost control of our food supply risking imminent collapse and are in need of a revolution.

I really looked forward to reading this book. I recently began planting vegetables again and was interested in growing some "heirloom" varieties mainly because so many modern hybrids have been bred for output or shelf-life instead of taste. (I've even ordered seed catalogs from Seed Savers and other small heirloom companies.) Unfortunately, my results have so far been poor (no one in the family liked the taste of the

varieties I tried) and I hoped this book might provide some guidance. However, as Ms. Ray writes in the Introduction "This is not a textbook on seed saving. I am looking to inspire you with my own life." (pg. xv)

And she tells us about her farm and visits to others to acquire old varieties. Some of these episodes are interesting, and she offers a few bits of advice, like pollinating squash flowers or saving tomato seeds or growing sweet potatoes. This is when the book really shines. But, "You won't get many of those details from me here," she writes. "My goal is simply to plant a seed." (pg 151) Much of the book is a paranoid screed against "big ag" and "big chemical" companies and how evil they and our government and justice system are (and some of her stories are indeed troublesome). "Science is worrisome when it only serves the interests of mercenaries and their employees... infecting our food supply with greed." (pg. 12) And in spite of her claim in the Preface that "I do not feel hopeless" (pg. ix) she later says "Who needs hope? ...It's not hope or love that keep me going. It's fight." (pg. 193)

Ms. Ray describes herself as a "granola" (a "back-to-the-earth" hippie who grew up post-60s) and comes off as a Luddite when it comes to technology. We get an earful of her philosophy of not flying and avoiding fossil-fuels ("Plastic is bad stuff." pg. 129) and basically living apart from modern society. Her attitude is militant and she calls anyone saving seeds a "revolutionary" and seems to find meaning in fighting modernity. But even she admits by the end that not all technology or corporations are evil. Sometimes hybrids combine beneficial traits and are useful, and public and private companies can do "good" (see pg. 174). (Incidentally, this is why many gardeners choose hybrids over heirlooms - they often grow better and are more reliable even if the taste is often inferior. And buying a packet of seeds for a dollar or two is more convenient than the effort to save your own, as even she admits.) Still... I completely relate to her desires for older varieties and will continue to look for ones that grow well for me and that the family likes. I'll just have to look elsewhere for information on them.
