

So You Want to Start a Seed Coop?



A guide for setting up a seed selling cooperative



The Gaia Foundation's Seed Sovereignty Programme has been working to build a more diverse and resilient seed system in the UK and Ireland since 2017.

We work with Commercial Growers, Farmers, Community Groups and Home Gardeners, offering useful networks, resources and information to help protect and restore seed diversity. Practically, we offer training in seed production and facilitation of new seed initiatives. We work with diverse partners across the Food Sovereignty movement to build a more ecological seed system together.

In this handbook, our Wales Coordinator Katie Hastings shares her experiences of working to build the Wales Seed Hub (WSH) – a coop of growers working together to sell open pollinated seed. The WSH growers have all been through training facilitated by the Seed Sovereignty Programme. Aware of the need for a clear route from training in seed production to making this seed available to others, Katie has been supporting this fledgling new seed coop to work on building a robust structure which allows them to sell their seeds together and add income streams to their farms.

This guide will take you through the lessons learnt and information gleaned from working to build the Wales Seed Hub from scratch. It is meant to be read by anyone wanting to follow in our footsteps, or perhaps forge their own way into collective seed selling. Katie will offer practical tips and advice based on her journey so far. This guide is not intended as an authoritative voice, we are confident that there are things we could have done better and lessons still to be learnt.

We hope this handbook will inspire you to get stuck into cooperative seed distribution, or at least plant the seed...

For more information on our trainings, events and networks: seedsovereignty.info

Seed breeds cooperation

We have been training Welsh growers in seed production for four years now. They come to class wanting to share stories of the varieties they are growing and they leave wanting to share the seeds they have grown. The abundance of one seed crop isn't meant to be hoarded; it's meant to be shared.

As growers have progressed through our training to producing high-quality seed crops, they naturally want to make these crops available for sale. Selling seed adds income streams to land-based businesses, as well as addressing the dire need for more UK-grown seed adapted to our conditions and not stuck behind a Brexit border.

In 2020 we formed the Wales Seed Hub, a collective of growers working together to sell and distribute their seed. Inspired by our teachers at Real Seeds, we wanted to get more Welsh-grown seed crops on the market. What better way to do this than cooperatively? Growers can feel isolated, often working long days alone. Working together addresses this by giving seed growers a platform to share responsibility. Seed production is a marathon, not a sprint; once the crop is grown it must then be harvested, dried, processed, packed, stored, registered and sold. It makes sense to pool resources and share the task load.

But the need to grow seed crops cooperatively cuts even deeper than the human need to work together... open pollinated seed crops can cross-pollinate, so they need to be isolated from one another. It is very difficult to grow multiple crops of the same species on the same farm. Seeds are biologically suited to being grown on multiple farms and shared at the point of harvest. It's as if they were divinely designed to encourage human networks to grow them in isolation and then actively come together to spread them across our communities.

The Wales Seed Hub is now entering its third season. We have moved from offering our debut two varieties for sale in 2021, to stocking our online shop with fourteen varieties in 2022. We have sat through hours of zoom meetings, discussing the intricacies of labels, the ethics of packet printing and the nuances of shared finances. We have learnt by doing, trialling systems as we have gone. But we are most certainly growing - literally and metaphorically - into a working seed-selling cooperative.

The time is ripe for boosting supply of UK-grown seed, and growers across our Seed Sovereignty networks are also looking to use their new-found skills in seed production to move into cooperative selling. In this article I offer our tips, fails and lessons learnt to help new seed cooperatives on their way. It's important to point out that we cannot claim to be experts. We are toddlers in the seed-selling world, still finding our feet. For every answer we can offer, we also have more questions. But hopefully our experiences can give other fledgling seed cooperatives a starting block to sprint off.

Contents

1	Find your Varieties	4
2	Records & Legalities	7
3	Growing	10
4	Harvesting & Processing	12
5	Packets	14
6	Distribution	16
7	Marketing	18
8	Finances	20
9	Structure	22

Find your Varieties

It is stating the obvious to say that you cannot start growing seed for sale without the starter seed to grow your crops from. It didn't become apparent to us quite how important this foundational principle was until we started looking at our variety list in our first year. While our members had access to some great open-pollinated seed, we quickly realised that we had bought this seed from other ethical seed companies in the UK. As a new seed-selling coop, we didn't want to be replicating the catalogues of existing seed sellers. We needed to provide something unique and special to our region.

It's not easy to find rare seed. It can take years to research, source the starter seed, bulk it out to sufficient quantities and trial it to see if it's actually any good! Our friends at Real Seeds explained to us that for every ten varieties they trial, one makes it into their catalogue. Bringing new varieties onto the market is a long game and one you need to start potentially years before you can sell the crop.

Not totally defeated by this timeframe, the Wales Seed Hub has adopted a two-pronged strategy.

Firstly, we work to find and trial special varieties unique to Wales. Lucky to have a member who has been working with seeds for a long time, we have access to a few unique varieties with a story, which we have immediately started growing. Using shared online folders, members of the WSH grow these seeds in small quantities and record the crop's health, performance and resilience. Although the work of trialling new varieties is unpaid (because WSH only pay growers for varieties sold), it is the foundation of a healthy seed catalogue and something which our members are building into their growing practices each year.

Secondly, we went for some initial 'quick wins' to get some crops sold. We grew some common varieties, already on the national list and widely available. Although this might seem counterintuitive for increasing seed diversity, there is still great value in producing locally-adapted and ecologically-grown versions of open pollinated varieties which might otherwise have been imported into the UK from warmer climates. We decided to offer some popular varieties for sale, with the added bonus of these varieties being grown close to where our customers would sow them.

Garden Organic's Heritage Seed Library (HSL) works to steward hundreds of vegetable varieties in the UK and is a treasure trove of genetic diversity. Joining them as a member allows access to starter seed for some of these varieties. Understanding the work put in by HSL to keep varieties properly grown, selected and protected opened a Pandora's box of seed ethics issues for us. Is it OK to take seed from a charity and sell it, without properly crediting the stewarding work that has been done to enable that seed to still be here? Having good conversations with HSL, we have understood that it is ultimately their mission to see these seeds more widely available. We have been able to work with HSL to obtain starter seed from them, credit them in our variety descriptions and ensure we have permissions to sell the seed we got from their library. While much of the seed donated to HSL has been done so with the desire to see it shared, some donors may have indicated that they do not want to see this seed sold for money. It's best to check. We have learnt the need to approach seed selling with delicacy and respect for the seed origin.

We have found that variety hunting is both a big challenge and a big adventure. Working together to track down seed stories and bulk up seed which has almost been forgotten can be exhilarating. We hope that the varieties we are trialling now will form the backbone of our seed catalogue in years to come.

Tips:

- A seed-selling coop is only as good as the varieties it offers, so choose your varieties well.
- Community seed libraries, allotment groups and gardening clubs can be a source of locally specific varieties, but always be careful to ask permission to sell their seed and credit them in the descriptions. It might also be appropriate to ensure that some money from seed sales goes back to the communities who have stewarded the seed.
- Plant breeders can be a source of new varieties and will often be keen to see these varieties sold. Some breeders are focused on creating varieties that work in specific conditions or for agroecological growing. Ensure breeders are credited and remunerated for the new varieties they have made available.
- Beware of replicating the catalogues of other small seed companies. Small seed sellers need to work together and avoid unnecessary duplication.
- Genebanks can be a source of rare varieties but remember you will get starter seed in very small quantities and this will take years to bulk up.
- Trial new varieties every year, record the results and be prepared to drop those which don't perform well.

Watch our webinar on Accessing Agrobiodiversity: Finding and using rare seeds for more discussion on this topic.

<https://www.seedsovereignty.info/events/seed-gathering-2021/>

2 Records & Legalities

Selling seed can seem like a minefield of legislation, but this is not impenetrable. The first thing we did at the Wales Seed Hub was register as a seed marketer with the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA)*. While this might sound intimidating, in reality it involves filling out an application form and having a telephone conversation. APHA's main concern was that we understood how to properly package, label and keep records for our crops. Our application took several months to process (in a pandemic time) and we were duly sent our seed marketers licence number and certificate.



We have learnt the importance of keeping records every step of the way. Using a shared spreadsheet to record the name, species, location, sowing date and harvest date of each crop. We have quickly added a multitude of other columns as we have progressed through the season. We record the estimated quantities of each seed, the variety description, the number of packets held at our central seed hub store and the number of packets held on each member's farm.

Batch numbers are even more important. Every batch of a crop treated differently (eg, harvested at a different time or stored in a different location) must be kept separately and allocated a different batch number. This allows us to distinguish between the conditions of one batch or another, and easily recall any seed which has a problem such as low germination.

In addition to our all important spreadsheet, each crop has a record sheet filled out by the grower. These record sheets give us notes for growth, any pests or diseases, harvesting conditions and processing treatments. We have learnt the importance of photographs, taking pictures at every step of a seed's journey, both for the benefit of our records and our social media accounts!

We have found collective responsibility and transparency to have been sufficiently fostered through the use of shared documents. We frequently return to these documents during our monthly meetings and use our records as the basis for all the information we make public on our website and shop listings. These records are also readily available to our APHA seed inspector should they want to see them.

Plant passports are an additional consideration, with certain crops requiring a plant passport for them to be sold within the UK. Our discovery that French Beans were included in the crops requiring a passport lead us to apply for a licence to issue plant passports with APHA very early on in our journey. Despite the officious name, a plant passport is basically an additional label to be added to a seed packet. First we applied to issue plant passports via an application form, then we bought a customisable ink stamp to stamp the relevant packets with the extra required information. Plant passports should include botanical name, traceability codes and country of origin. The passports purpose is to ensure traceability in the supply chain if any plant health issues arise.

Finally, plant varieties are also bound by legislation. The Plant Varieties Act 1997 states that any variety sold must be listed on a national list. The restrictions around getting varieties onto this list are well documented, with each listed variety needing to be distinct, uniform and stable (which is often difficult for genetically diverse heritage and landrace

crops). But all is not lost. For seed sellers working with small packets, there is an option to have a variety listed as an amateur variety. Unlike the standard national list, the amateur variety listing costs less and does not require the same level of uniformity. We chose to list the Kew Blue French bean as an amateur variety. This cost us £100 and required us to fill out a variety descriptor with information such as colour of flowers and size of pods. This made our variety legal to sell.

It would be pertinent to point out that not all seed companies list all their varieties, amateur or otherwise. While it is technically illegal to sell unlisted varieties, unlisted varieties are all over UK seed catalogues. While APHA cannot state that the legislation should be ignored, they also do not actively enforce the rules around the variety listings. Each seed seller must make an individual choice about registering varieties they sell.

Tips:

- Register as a seed marketer with APHA
- Register to issue plant passports with APHA - this only applies to certain crops, you can check the list on the APHA website
- Keep crop records for every crop you grow
- Take pictures at every stage of your seed crop's life
- Keep centralised records for all your members crop location, harvest date and batch number
- Share responsibility for checking records and storing information
- Check variety listings (national list and amateur variety list) and make a decision about if you need to register your varieties

Your APHA seed inspector can be a useful person to ask questions of to ensure you are recording everything correctly.

The APHA website contains detailed information on legislation and registration requirements.

* APHA is an executive agency, sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, the Welsh Government, and The Scottish Government. APHA are therefore the agency to contact for seed regulation in Wales, Scotland and England.

3 Growing

Actually growing the seed should be the easy bit, right? All the Wales Seed Hub members have been through our Seed Sovereignty Programme's Year-Long Seed Production training, and so they understand all the considerations around isolation distances, plant health and population sizes. Any new members joining the WSH should have either undertaken the same intermediate training or had some experience producing high quality seed before.



Good quality seed births good quality plants. We have drawn up some Wales Seed Hub Agreements, which set out what members are agreeing to when they join us. A salient part of these agreements addresses quality issues, setting out generally understood commercial standards such as minimum isolation distances, minimum population sizes and minimum germination rates.

We are also lucky to have an expert in our midst, with one of our members being a well-known seed saver. This adds to the peer-to-peer learning happening in our group. We use monthly meetings to update on our crop progression, with the opportunity to answer one another's questions and share information. This has led to a bigger existential question over why people join the WSH, with some members stating that the peer-to-peer learning was their main motivation, of even more importance than selling seed. The value of these hubs for continued learning and mutual support should not be underestimated.

WSH members grow seed on their own smallholdings and farms. They are responsible for the crop's treatment right up to delivery to the central seed store. This means that there needs to be an element of trust and transparency within the group. It helps that some of our members live in the same regions, enabling them to visit one another's crops.

Selection is another important component of seed production, and it can really help to have variety descriptors to enable us to select for the correct crop traits.

It's important to understand that crops fail. While seed crops must be treated with diligence and care, we can be hit by pests, diseases or unexpected weather. Farming is risky, and our members take a risk on growing seed crops they might not be able to sell. For this reason, it makes sense for us to spread risk around, with rare crops being grown by more than one member. It also makes sense for members to grow more than one seed crop, so that when failures occur there will hopefully be successes with a different crop.

Tips:

- Ensure your growers are properly trained
- Be transparent about what is happening in your seed growers fields
- Foster an atmosphere of peer to peer learning in which you can share knowledge with each other
- Have written agreements on quality standards, including: minimum isolation distances, minimum population sizes and minimum germination rates
- Have a system in place for how to deal with poor quality seed
- Accept failures, they happen!
- Only sell high quality seed

4 Harvesting & Processing

Our members harvest and process their own seed. They have different ways of storing their seed safely and different techniques for getting their seed sufficiently dry. In the humid conditions of Wales, drying is certainly a challenge! While we would definitely benefit from dehumidifying facilities in the future, currently we are limited to silica gel, computer fans, windy days and airy barns.



While certain items of machinery would make our lives easier, we do most of our processing by hand. This is a huge consideration when looking at which crops to grow. Some crops will be much harder to thresh and clean than others. Our members have found children, family visitors and neighbours very handy when it comes to threshing and winnowing seed!

As mentioned before, it's vitally important to keep batches separate. If half of a crop is dried in the air and half is dried indoors, these batches should be kept separate and given different batch numbers. If we find that one batch doesn't germinate well and another does, we can keep those batches distinct and can sell only the batch that meets germination standards.

Once a seed crop is dry, clean and ready to be packaged, it needs to undergo a germination test. We have guidelines in our WSH Agreements for how germination tests should be undertaken. The guidelines include growing mediums, temperatures and length of time for the germination test. These standards have been taken from commercial guidelines obtained by our members and modified. Growers test a sample of their seed and photograph the results, giving us a shared record of the germination rates. Any seed that falls under our specified germination threshold (which is generally around 90%) cannot be sold.

Tips:

- Think about storage and processing when choosing crops to grow
- Keep batches separate
- Have written guidelines for germination tests
- Keep a record of germination results
- Real Seeds have an open source design for a seed cleaner run from a vacuum cleaner which can be used to winnow seed
- Rope people in to help with processing, it can be a fun activity!

5 Packets

Our members are responsible for physically packing their seeds into packets once germination testing is done. This can be a fiddly process, requiring precision jewellers' scales or specific volume scoops. Different crops require different packing solutions.

Because our growers are effectively selling their own seeds direct to customers via the WSH, they choose the number of seeds per packet and price, usually sticking closely to the quantities that other seed companies offer.



The branding and printing of our seed packets is a collective endeavour. We want our seeds to look the same and be recognisable as coming from us. We chose to employ a designer to create a seed pack design for us in one colour, keeping a space blank in the middle for variety descriptions to be added. Our packets are printed in bulk on a risograph printer at Oxford Greenprint, an environmentally friendly printing technique that uses vegetable inks pushed through a master template. While the design process was time-consuming, these packets can be used for years to come.

In our experience, regular discussions about the packets has helped to foster shared responsibility, with one member taking responsibility for organising the printing. For seeds we're selling in higher quantities, we've pre-printed the variety descriptions. For smaller batches, variety descriptions are printed on separate labels and stuck onto the standard packets.

We hold a collective responsibility for ensuring that the packets meet the legal standards, which include correct labelling and sealing. But we do allocate one person to be responsible for checking packet requirements and reporting back to the group.

Packets must include the variety name, the seed batch, plant passport (where relevant) and our contact details. We ensure that the packets are properly sealed to prevent cross-contamination.

Tips:

- Think about seed packet design well in advance of harvest
- Have standard packets printed to give a unified look
- Check legal requirements for labelling information. These can be found in the Seed Marketing Regulations and your Seed Inspector can help you.
- Consider how each grower will be getting their seeds into the packets, measurements can be tricky and vary from crop to crop
- Look to other seed companies to get a general idea of how many seeds to include in a packet and what to charge
- Real Seeds have open-source designs for printing your own seed measure scoops, which help with swift packing

6 Distribution

We have rotating roles within the WSH, one of which is Secretary, who is responsible for being the named person on our APHA license. The named Secretary is the keeper of the central seed store, keeping the seeds in one place ready for distribution (and possible inspection). Once the seed is in the packets, it goes to our central store.



Hundreds of seed packets can take up considerable space. We ordered collapsible shelving to be used in the Secretary's office and storage boxes with ventilation to keep the stock safe long term. The central store needs to be dry and cool. It is a significant responsibility to store the group's seeds correctly, and it could become increasingly necessary to work out how to share this risk and ensure the safety of the hard grown seeds.

We had originally planned to sell most of our seeds in person at events and farmers markets, but the pandemic had other ideas! Rushing to open for sales in 2021, we opted to use the Open Food Network software to create an online shop to take orders and card payments. Only offering postage once per week reduced the workload of having to make multiple post office trips, with the software giving us clear lists of orders to dispatch.

Paying for recycled cardboard envelopes from our central WSH kitty, our Secretary has the weekly job of packing up envelopes and posting them second class. We quickly discovered that the Post Office are not so keen to have us turn up with 35 parcels at the counter. We signed up to the free 'Drop and Go' service which allows us to top of an online balance and then literally drop the parcels at the Post Office and go. Our parcels are weighed at quiet periods of the day and the postage is deducted from our pre-paid balance.

As we grow in size our online selling fees will increase. We will need to weigh up the benefits of using our online shop versus in person sales. While we can reach more people online, we also gain work in managing our selling platform and posting orders. It is unclear if this is outweighed by the extra time we would spend delivering seed to in person venues to be sold. We suspect that there is a need to benefit from the publicity that in person events can offer, while also having the seed available to buy online 24/7. We will likely choose a hybrid of both selling models to reach as many customers as possible.

Tips:

- Think about safe storage – it should be cool, dry and sufficiently spacious
- Weigh up the benefits of online vs in person sales
- Plan for extra postage, packing and delivery costs
- Sign up to 'Drop and Go' at the Post Office
- Chose selling software that can take payments and give clear order lists – these reduce labour

7 Marketing

Opening our shop for our first test run in 2021, we were a little concerned that the orders didn't just flood in! We knew we had produced good seed and we knew that people wanted it. But establishing ourselves as a go-to seed supplier was obviously going to take time. We knew we had opened our shop too late in the season (March), with most people putting seed orders in over Dec / Jan for the coming year. We also knew it would be difficult to get people to order from us when we could only offer two varieties that spring.



Opening again in January 2022, armed with 14 new varieties, we were in a much stronger position. With 200 packets sold in the first fortnight, we could see that offering more choice, and at the correct time of year, was really paying off.

Being supported by the Seed Sovereignty Programme, the WSH has been in a good position to reach out to the networks of seed savvy people in the UK looking for an ecological seed option. We have utilised social media accounts attached to Seed Sovereignty networks and linked in with media opportunities like #SeedWeek.

Spreading the word about a seed outlet needs to happen in the same way a plant might propagate itself: using multiple strategies, in multiple directions. We now realise we need to publish articles, attend seed events, hold stalls and approach local groups. We have asked friends running a CSA to put fliers in their veg boxes. We requested a stand at a prominent seed swap. We were lucky enough to capture the attention of a national newspaper. As we spread our story further, we expect our sales to increase.

We found stories work best to capture the imagination. Pictures of our growers holding their crops and telling the world why they grow them do 50% better on social media than pictures of the crops themselves. Seeds have stories too and it's important to share these variety stories to help people engage with why our seeds are special.

Following advice from our mentors at Real Seeds, we plan to target our local media next, attempting to offer local interest pieces on why we want to sell Welsh-grown seed in Wales. We plan to connect with more gardening groups, garden centres and environmentally-minded folk, looking to connect with the 'low hanging fruit' of potential customers already interested in a resilient seed system.

Tips:

- Spread your message in diverse ways
- Share the stories (and faces!) of your growers
- Pictures speak a thousand words, make sure you capture good pictures with your crops when they are out in the fields
- Remember it takes time to build a customer base
- Connect with regional groups already interested in seed sovereignty
- Connect with national seed networks through the Seed Sovereignty Programme

8 Finances

The WSH is set up primarily for growers to sell their seed direct to customers (as a cooperative), so our aim is to pass most of the money from selling the seed straight back to the grower. Currently our agreement is for growers to receive 80% of the packet price from every sale.



WSH hold a central kitty to pay for costs such as seed packet printing, website fees, card transaction costs, packaging and registration costs. 20% of the cost of each seed packet goes into the central kitty to cover these things. WSH does not aim to make a profit or accrue any cash reserves, simply cover costs and enable growers to make the best financial return on their seeds.

It's important to point out at this point that we have no idea if this allocation of 80% to grower and 20% to the WSH will work out long term! Because we had no precedent to follow, we were forced to make an educated guess as to our costs and let it play out. As we increase in size, our central costs could significantly grow. For now, 20% of seed packet sales seem to comfortably cover the costs we are incurring as a group.

Because our members all participate in the administration, running and promotion of WSH, we can keep the central running costs low. Our members do the work so we don't have to employ staff. Although the WSH has been generously supported by the paid time of a Seed Sovereignty Programme Coordinator to help set up systems and establish the enterprise, this support will eventually be withdrawn so the WSH will function as a self-sufficient entity.

Because WSH is not a legally registered cooperative, we cannot currently open a group bank account. This has meant that one of our members has used their farm bank account to 'host' our finances, taking payments from our shop into their account and paying growers for their seed out of this account. The financial records are kept transparent by our Treasurer, with members able to see the books. Financial decisions, such as how many seed packets to order, are made collectively.

In the long term it will become prudent to hold the finances in a group business account, with multiple members having access. There will be an income threshold which will signify the tipping point at which we feel our finances will be safer held in a legally collective account. We have not reached this tipping point yet.

Tips:

- Estimate costs collectively
- Ensure growers are paid the best price for their seeds
- Be ready to adjust the percentage of sales kept by the hub as your situation changes
- Keep financial records transparent
- Find someone to hold the finances as you are starting out
- Ensure the long-term safety of collective funds by looking at setting up a group bank account with multiple signatories

9 Structure

As a fledging enterprise, we opted for a very simple starter structure. WSH is a self-employed partnership, with each member being responsible for declaring their own income from WSH and including this in their own personal tax returns. This structure means that the WSH does not exist legally separate to its members. WSH is simply a partnership between multiple farmers and an agreed structure for how they work together.

A self-employed partnership works well for a small enterprise, keeping the legal responsibilities and administration decentralised. It has become clear as our activities unfold that a self-employed partnership has its limitations, most notably in the fact that the WSH cannot open its own bank account or protect individual members from any financial liabilities that the group may induce.

As the WSH matures, it will be sensible to look at creating a legal entity which can act as a protective barrier between the members and WSH activities. This structure could take the form of a community benefit society, a company limited by guarantee or a community interest company. These structures will require further administration, record keeping and reporting. They will also bring further security, limited liability and public transparency.

For us, the most important thing in birthing the WSH has been to have a clearly defined agreement on how we work together under the WSH banner. Although not legally binding, our WSH Agreement sets out how people can join, what behaviour is expected of them and the process for asking them to leave (should the need arise). This agreement has laid the foundations for good working practices and clear understanding of responsibilities.

Tips:

- Obtain some advice on the legal structure best for you
- Make clear agreements on who should be declaring income and paying tax
- Make clear agreements on who holds personal responsibility for group activities
- As you grow bigger, think about forming a legal entity
- Make clear agreements on how people join and leave the hub
- Make clear agreements on the way you work together as a foundation of good communication

More information on legal structures can be found at Coops UK:

<https://www.uk.coop/start-new-co-op/start/choosing-your-legal-form>



This guide was written by Katie Hastings, Seed Sovereignty Coordinator for Wales, and produced by the Gaia Foundation's Seed Sovereignty Programme.

All the lessons shared in this guide are the result of our collaboration with the Wales Seed Hub growers, and the journey we have been on together to learn how to set up a seed selling coop.

Illustrations by Robin Lane Roberts robinlaneroberts.com

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The Seed Sovereignty Programme is made possible by our funders: Thirty Percy, Samworth Foundation, The A Team Foundation, Savitri Trust and Be the Earth Foundation.



The Wales Seed Hub produces seed grown on Welsh farms using agroecological practices. Their seed is open pollinated and carefully selected. They try to grow varieties that are not widely available elsewhere and grow well in the Welsh climate.

The Wales Seed Hub is a cooperative. Seed is grown on members' farms. The cooperative work together to register, distribute and market their seed.

www.seedhub.wales



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