

Seed Sovereignty for market gardeners

In this article I have distilled a lot of the discussion that ensued at the Organic Seed Alliance Conference session this February 2022, 'Seed Production for Market Growers.' I will also be drawing on my own experience, where I grew seed crops alongside market crops for 12 years.



Summer squash seed crop at Leen organics, 2022

Having worked with growers for many years, more recently training them in seed production, it has become clear that those most suited to the field of seed saving are growers who have prior experience producing crops for market.

My reasons for focusing on this cohort are obvious. Market growers already have the skills that are required of good seed savers. They have great observational and organisational skills, are well versed in agronomy, and have most of the necessary infrastructure already in place. These factors combined ensure that growers are on a fast-track route to becoming good seed savers. In other words, it means that when it comes to training, the focus can be on how to select an onion and grow it for seed, not on growing a good onion in the first place.

In recent years, the importance of seed saving has become even more apparent. In these islands, Brexit and the Covid pandemic have greatly diminished the availability of certain seed varieties, with some growers realising that the only way to counteract this problem is to start saving seed themselves. The reduced availability coupled with the declining quality of some seeds – some open pollinated varieties have been poorly maintained over the years and a lot of imported seeds are grown in climates dissimilar to ours – means that there is both a greater impetus to save seed and greater rewards for doing so.

Additionally, growers like a challenge and will jump at the chance to increase their horticultural knowledge. Learning seed saving techniques adds a depth and range to the knowledge that they already have about crop production, knowledge that may otherwise have become a bit stale.

One of the most attractive benefits of seed saving is in diversifying your holding and adding another income stream. Depending on

their end market, vegetable seeds are more valuable per square meter than most market crops. Selling at retail prices would give the best return but it involves a lot more than just putting seeds into an envelope. Wholesale prices for a small grower may not stack up, economies of scale rule. However, somewhere in between there may be a sweet spot if the grower can find the right seed company with whom to build a relationship.

Another benefit of taking on seed crops is the opportunity it gives growers to cultivate varieties they might never have tried otherwise. Personally speaking, being a seed guardian for the Irish Seed Savers Association has introduced me to varieties that have subsequently become stock commercial market garden varieties for me over the years. Between that and trialling new varieties against your best varieties you can learn a lot. You may even find that there are better varieties out there.....

The advantages of growing seed crops may not be readily apparent to those who have yet to try it. Oftentimes, the quality of the seed that can be grown is better than that which can be bought, and as seed gets more and more expensive and good varieties are discontinued, it certainly makes more sense to grow your own.

But it can't be all rosy in the garden. What are some of the downsides?

An obvious drawback is that saving seeds can distract from the growing of market crops, which in itself is a complicated and labour-intensive process. Unsurprisingly, the seed harvest comes at the same time as peak produce harvest and so balancing these demands can be tricky.

Another downside of growing seed for sale during the off-season means that as a grower, you will have very little down time. However, as veg sales slow up after Christmas the sale of seeds will in turn take up that slack and provide an off-season income that could carry you through the hungry gap.



Seed/propagation tunnel



Flowering Ailsa Craig onions

Seed crops are also in the ground for a lot longer than market crops and this requires careful planning to make it work well, but this problem is not insurmountable. In order to compartmentalise and ensure that the seed crops don't get in the way of the market crops, it helps to have cropping areas devoted exclusively to seed. On paper this is a great idea but perhaps not as easy to put into practice. Not only are crops in the ground longer but they can take longer to realise an income. If it's a biennial crop this can be an extra seven or eight months over a market crop, and so this must be factored in as well. Having crops in the ground longer brings its own risks in promoting diseases (think clubroot on brassicas). It is therefore essential that seed crops follow rotations, and that everything is done to mitigate against this happening.

Isolation distances from other flowering crops of the same species can also be an issue. This effectively means that with cross pollinating crops you can only grow one variety of that species if you intend to keep it for seed production without using isolation cages.

On the plus side growing market crops and selecting some of those for seeds works out very economically because the crops that are rogued out as unsuitable for a seed crop will be perfectly suitable for the market and as a result there will be very little waste. Also having a big population from which to select is best practice. However, issues can arise if it is not communicated/labelled well, and a crop meant to be for seed ends up being sold for market unintentionally. Another good reason for having the seed saving part of the enterprise separated from the market garden.

One of the win wins that I have discovered is that a propagation tunnel will double as a seed drying tunnel. Over the last two years it has worked well in that just as the last transplants leave the tunnel, the first seed crops are looking for somewhere to finish off drying. It makes excellent use of a piece of infrastructure that most growers already have and which more or less stands idle once the spring rush has come and gone.

At my current scale - two thirds of an acre and 30 to 40 varieties of seed - the addition of a zig zag cleaner (plans on Real Seeds website at <https://www.realseeds.co.uk/seedcleaner.html>) has made a big difference to the cleaning and grading of the seed. With the addition of wire frames (site fences) for drying, some sieves, a few tarpaulins, buckets and trays the costs of extra infrastructure have

been modest. One of the bigger investments I have made is a shade net for the propagation tunnel so that it doesn't get too hot for drying seeds. The only other piece of equipment I would love but wonder would I have enough use for is a thresher. They are not that easy to find and are expensive, but even at that I imagine they would pay for themselves quickly after the initial purchase.



F1 Tomato de-hybridisation project

Photos: Jason Horner

Perhaps this article has piqued your interest, or at least given you some food for thought. I am putting together a session on this subject for our online Seed Gathering next February 2023 when we will hopefully hear from some practitioners who have successfully incorporated seed crops into their market garden setups. It would be great to have more people contributing to seed sovereignty and expanding access to and availability of organic seed.

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OSA. Seed Production for Market Growers: <https://youtu.be/jaPh-1rIAp4>



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