

www.rareseeds.com

www.seedsavers.org

www.seedsofchange.com

www.southernexposure.com

www.monticellocatalog.org

Monsanto

Diane Drinkard shared this with me several years ago. The American nursery trade is a 39.6 billion dollar a year industry. With the purchase of Seminis in January of 2005, Monsanto is now estimated to control between 85 and 90 percent of the U.S. nursery market. This includes the pesticide, herbicide and fertilizer markets. By merging with or buying up the competition, dominating genetic technology, and lobbying the government to make saving seeds illegal, this monolith has positioned itself as the largest player in the gardening game.

Monsanto holds over eleven thousand U.S. seed patents. When Americans buy garden seed and supplies, most of the time they are buying from Monsanto regardless of who the retailer is.

Most home gardeners started noticing the initials PVP appearing next to selections in the mail order garden catalogs a few years ago. This stands for Plant Variety Protection. It means the seed or plant carries a U.S. patent. It is illegal to save seed from or otherwise propagate PVP varieties. Consumers will have to buy more each year if they wish to grow a PVP variety.

Greenpeace chides, “Monsanto-**no food shall be grown that we don’t own**.”

They could be right. Terminator Technology promises to be a big money maker for Monsanto and its subsidiaries. Plants are genetically modified so they won’t produce seed, or if seed is produced, it is sterile. With this maneuver they are guaranteed a continuing market for vegetable, fruit, and flower seed.

Consider the newest Frankenstein called Traitor technology. This charming little piece of genetic engineering will help Monsanto’s chemical division rake in billions of dollars a year from across the globe. It allows growers to control the genetic traits of plants by applying an array of chemicals, all owned by Monsanto. Do your genetically modified watermelons have blight? No problem, for a price you can buy the chemical that will turn on the plant’s blight fighting gene. No kidding. It is estimated Traitor technology could dominate world seed supply with an astonishing 80 percent of the market by 2010.

Six companies Du Pont, Mitsui, Syngent, Aventis and Dow control 98 percent of the world’s seeds. These companies are opening research facilities and acquiring local seed companies and farmland on every continent, and they can’t do it fast enough.

Imports of seed and stock from Pakistan, India, Mexico, Thailand and of course China, are on the rise. Countries like Thailand boast of seed exports rising at 12 percent

per year from 1998-2001. American seed exports fell at twice that rate for the same time period. As biotechnology forges on, something is lost. At first it is barely noticeable, just a sense that something is different.

◆

Ashes, ashes, all fall down

Before it was acquired by Monsanto, Seminis eliminated 2,000 varieties of seed from its inventory. The first things to go were the older open-pollinated varieties-vining petunias, butterfly weed, butter beans, German green tomatoes, and other heirlooms grown by gardeners for generations, replaced by genetically engineered varieties.

◆

High-tech patented hybrid varieties are far more profitable for transnational seed companies to produce and sell. These new Frankenseeds are bred to perform adequately over a wide geographical area, giving the patent holder a much larger market.

◆

As consumers are losing the freedom to choose what they will buy and grow, thousands of varieties of garden seed are walking the plank, straight into the abyss of extinction. Consider this, in 1981 there were approximately 5,000 vegetable seed varieties available in U.S. catalogs. Today there are less than 500, a 90 percent reduction.

◆

Seeds removed from commercial production are left in private corporate seed banks. Open pollinated seed will not store indefinitely, it must be propagated to ensure its survival. This is an expensive proposal, one not likely to happen in the world of capital consolidation and wide profit margins.

◆

The more likely scenario is the “unprofitable” heirloom seeds will be allowed to expire and patented hybrids will take their place. Seed biodiversity will be compromised globally, while the corporate stranglehold tightens around the throat of the consumer.

◆

Kent Whealey, co-founder of Seed Savers Exchange, says “Few gardeners comprehend the true scope of their garden heritage or how much is in immediate danger of being lost forever.”

◆

Taking the ball and going home

Like the glaciers that rolled across North America, heaving and prying the earth into new forms, giant transnational seed companies are changing the face of gardening as it once was. What’s left behind is the product of a destructive force to be sure, but something beautiful and promising also remains.

◆

Across the globe people are growing and saving heirloom seeds, ensuring the promise of diversity and heritage for future generations. Groups like Seed Savers Exchange are blooming in the remains of corporate devastation. Some of these organizations are large, offering seeds from across the globe. Others are neighborhood and regional groups saving and trading local favorites. Whatever their size, they are dedicated to preserving the earth’s biodiversity. All it takes to form a seed saving club is for one neighbor to pick up the phone and say to another, “Do you want to trade some seeds this year?” There you have it, a seed saving club.

◆

Imagine if one neighbor called another neighbor and that neighbor called yet another, and so on. The next thing you know southern growers and northern growers, farmers and city folk, church goers and non-church goers, would be united in an effort to prevent the extermination of thousands of varieties of seed. What a beautiful thing it would be.

◆

Before you could shake a dollar at it, the landscape of the nursery trade would change. It’s the age-old law of supply and demand; if no one wants patented hybrids, then they become unprofitable in short order. The reigning corporate kings of the gardening game would be forced to take their ball and go home, leaving consumers free to choose a more sustainable pastime.

◆

It

could happen.</p>