

Workshop Title: The Business of Seed

Speakers & their titles: Andrea Berry, Owner of Hope Seeds; Angus Mellish, Seed Manager at Vesey's Seeds Ltd.; and Gilberte Doelle, Manager at Wild Rose Farm. This panel was moderated by Rupert Adams of Salt Spring Seeds in BC.

Executive Summary

This panel explores - from the perspective of a seed grower, a small seed company entrepreneur, and a medium-sized local seed company - the opportunities and challenges for the seed industry in Atlantic Canada and beyond. Panelists discuss how the seed sector has changed over the course of their careers, the quality issues that can pose barriers to new entrants, and how some of these challenges might be addressed.

Detailed Notes

The moderator called the session to order, introduced himself, and asked each panelist to introduce themselves.

Rupert Adams introduced himself as working with Salt Spring Seeds (SSS) for about 9 years. He started with packing seeds and moved all the way up to running the company! Now he spends most of his time growing. SSS buys their seed from their organic growers per packet, which is a little different (most places buy bulk prior to packaging). He says the company knows each grower and trusts them. (They're all local within Vancouver Island, the lower mainland and the Gulf Islands).

Andrea Berry introduced herself as the owner of Hope Seeds in the Annapolis Valley. Hope Seeds was gifted to her in 2004 by the company's founder who started seed saving as a hobby and passed it to Andrea as the business grew beyond the scope of what she wanted to manage. Andrea said that Hope Seeds became her dayjob in 2007 when she bought Rawlinson Garden Seed (which was started and based in Truro and was 35 years old at the time of purchase). While that business wasn't growing any of its own seed, Andrea farms about 15% of the seed that Hope Seeds offers, as well as working with growers in ON, QC and in the Maritimes. All the local growers together contribute about 45% of Hope Seeds' overall seed supply. The rest comes from bigger companies that offer high quality seed of varieties that we can't or don't grow here for seed crops (like carrot seed).

Angus is Seed Manager at Vesey's. The company was founded 75 years ago by Arthur Vesey, who always had better crops than his neighbours, and enough business savvy to turn that into a profitable venture. Though the company has

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grown beyond seeds, that's what's closest to their hearts and they still call themselves a seed company. The biggest clientele/market they serve is home gardens, although in the Maritimes they also sell to commercial farmers - from those with only a roadside stand and a few acres, to farmers with thousands of acres. Vesey's has very high seed quality standards, and rely on very longstanding relationships with their seed producers.

Gilberte Doelle began her intro by saying that her first seed experience was with her parents' garden. They grew a regional variety of bean called Caribee. Southwest Nova Scotia used to be a seed growing area for the province, and for Vesey's, but Vesey's doesn't really source from there any more. As that shift happened, people from the community would approach Gilberte saying "keep this seed alive" so she did! She's been growing seed commercially for about 3 years now - the new kid on the block.

Question: [This question was directed to Andrea and Angus]. In your time with Vesey's and Hope Seeds, what changes have you witnessed in the commercial seed world? and what have those changes meant for your businesses?

Angus started off by referencing that, in the business arena - as things evolve and mature - and there are limited opportunities for growth, companies start buying each other. As a result, things get condensed. As the companies get bigger, they focus less on smaller customers in favour of much bigger clients. This consolidation, along with fewer available varieties, have been the trends in seed sector as well. He said that this does open opportunities for smaller companies to start up, and we're starting to see that now. Some of the northeast USA companies are becoming more interested in selling to our area, and organic seed is also starting to gain more attention.

Andrea commented that she's noticed in her own practice, what began as her doing everything with seed from a place of curiosity and passion, has turned into her taking things much more seriously. As the business evolved, and as she received feedback - good or bad - from growers, it became evident how important this work is, and how important high quality seed is to producers.

There's also much much more interest in local seed and local food. When she first started coming to ACORN 13 years ago, there was no seed content at the conference. It was frustrating because she had questions and things to learn, and no one to ask. Because there's no real history of seed production in this part of the world, there's not a lot of resources, "old knowledge", or even old equipment to draw upon. ECOSGN (Eastern Canadian Organic Seed Growers Network) actually has stepped into this role a bit. ECOSGN was created at the Guelph Organic Conference. Andrea comments that the people there confronted her and

other small seed company owners with serious questions about their practices and their quality control. It really drove home that there are people who want small seed companies to succeed - who want to support them - but they'd need to step it up to allow them to do that.

She said what she's seeing now is that the resources she's been dreaming of are coming to be. There's national awareness, there's national support. Which is wonderful. But what effect will that have? Her seed company is still very small - a drop in the bucket really. And, as such, is under the radar. She's done her best to ensure that CFIA rules are met, but can she be confident that she's done everything right? As a seed company grows and gets more serious and more well resourced, it becomes harder and harder to fly under the radar.

Question: [This question was addressed to Gilberte]. What opportunities did you see in contract seed production? What aspects have paid off for you, and what have been some of your challenges?

Gilberte started by saying that she is also a market gardener and sells everything she produces retail direct. She likes dealing with the smaller seed houses that have a high quality standard, because she knows them and they communicate well. It's a good situation. She likes growing her own seeds because she's kind of a control freak (!) and growing seeds allows her to keep control of her farm. She likes to keep diseases and pests to a minimum on the farm - if she's growing her own high quality seed, she has fewer problems in that area, which is a big incentive to do it. There's a very high demand for organic seeds. She said, growing on commission, the key is high quality, rather than marketing. If the quality is there she can expand to more, different markets later. She said she doesn't have "sexy" equipment; she relies on Andrea for that. Every man hour on her farm is very important and, she says, if she has any spare time, she doesn't want to spend that threshing. A major challenge is strategically increasing her knowledge base. She can easily grow her seeds on her market garden land, which is an advantage. Bloopers do happen of course, but you really do have to be on the ball. With seed production you have to be really good, and that takes time. "If I can't guarantee no cross pollination, I'm not selling that seed." Because of that, on the farm, only the senior staff or carefully supervised staff work with the seed. It's really like a different business, but still on the farm.

Question: [This was addressed to all 3 panelists]. With this context set, what do each of you see as the future opportunities?

Angus started off: "It's tough." The challenge he referenced is that his primary loyalty is to his customers. What he sells has to be right. If it doesn't grow, it comes back on Vesey's as the seller. The people he buys from have been with the company for 50 years. When people approach him to grow seed for Vesey's,

he wants to support them, but isn't sure where to start.

Follow-up Question: So there has to be trust in the education and skill level of people growing the seed...

Angus says, yes. He grows rutabaga seed, which he's been doing for 8 years. He says that when he started, he was totally incompetent! He started because the initial grower dropped the variety. He says growing a turnip, and growing a turnip seed (and having the quality and ability to do it on a large enough scale that you can make money at it) are totally different things! It takes a long time. When people approach Angus, he says, they usually say "What can I grow for you?" He needs them to say "this is what I can grow, this is how long I've been growing it, here are some samples, do some tests." The Vesey's brand is built on quality - that takes time and experience.

Andrea chimed in by saying that every crop is an amazing learning experience. She plans on getting a seed crop and every single year *something* doesn't work out. All of those are learning opportunities. People call her as well, saying "hey, I have more parsnip seed than I need, do you want to sell it?" She said she now has about 10 questions she asks before the conversation even moves to a starting point. So you do have to be good at growing vegetables, but at the same time you kind of have to throw out all that knowledge when you make the switch to seed. Everyone in Canada can grow and eat carrots. Carrot seed? *Maybe* you can grow it in south BC.

So it's not just a matter of who's interested in growing seed, but what can they grow - consistently - every single year?

Gilberte mentioned that, being in the position of both market gardener and seed grower, she wants to provide - and *get!* - good quality seed. And the quality of the seed coming out of the field is a huge factor - regardless of how fancy your storage is. She says "I'm happy to experiment but I want to market and sell consistent results."

THE FLOOR IS OPENED FOR QUESTIONS.

Angus, you mentioned Northeast USA companies doing some breeding?

Yes, check out Seneca Veg Harvest in New York State.

Angus and Andrea, when you work with a contract grower, do you do additional seed cleaning for quality, and how does that affect the price?

Andrea: Yes, we do. And we also offer up our equipment. With her growers, there's a clause in the contract that says if she spends her time cleaning the

crop, she charges by the hour. But she says that doesn't happen much. Angus indicated that they don't do a lot of contract stuff. There is some extra handling when the seed comes in.

What's the role of the seed company in improving the quality coming from growers?

Andrea said she's done some training with her growers, but they need more. And would appreciate more. Hope Seeds is now bursting at the seams and wants to get bigger. She's asking herself what are the essential business side components of getting more high quality stuff in the door? What are the scaling up components? Growers would like more support, and she'd like to give it.

Gilberte says, "As a grower, I need what I need. If I don't get it, I'm not happy. Last year some of our beans didn't germ which means I didn't get paid." She also mentioned that she finds heritage varieties outperform hybrids in organic settings. She likes that Vesey's has signed the safe seed pledge - it's important to her that they'll guarantee GM free.

Question for Rupert: How does SSS maintain quality when growers are packing their own seed?

He says it's trust and relationship building. They wouldn't package under-quality seed, and SSS knows that. He says, "In one instance when the seed wasn't clean, we stopped working with the grower. We'll only work with them if we trust their integrity, competence, education." A lot of their growers are self-trained. They do a lot of training as well, and education through the Salt Spring Seed Bank.

Follow up question: Do your growers need to be organic?

BC is different with certification - there, they can still use "organic" and "organically" which is not the case in the rest of Canada. The reason is that there are so many certification companies in BC that it's still being worked out. In the last 5 years, 3 of SSS growers have dropped out of the certification process. This comes down to trust and integrity. We know they grow organically, even more than what the regulations specify. The same question came up in The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security, and we decided to go with "ecological seed."