

Notes from a seed collector.

I have been growing vegetables for fifty years now. My compulsion started when I was six years old and my mother gave me a corner of the kitchen garden to grow radishes and beans. I was fortunate enough to attend a Rudolph Steiner school in Sussex that had an enlightened attitude towards discipline. I was not always perfectly behaved so frequently found myself on detention in the walled vegetable garden. I could think of worse punishments!



For the last thirty years my work has allowed me to travel the world and I have collected vegetable seeds from as far afield as Sulawesi, Mauritius, the former USSR, Zanzibar, French Polynesia, Australia, western Europe, the USA, throughout Africa and other distant and forgotten lands. My passion is to find beans and chillies which I can propagate and get to fruit here.



In 1989, whilst working in the Ukraine, I was staying in a Communist party hotel in the mining town of Donetsk. One day I was in the market and saw a beautiful pepper, three-lobed and about the size of a tennis ball. The vendor told me she had been growing this capsicum for as long as she could remember and always saved seed. The pepper was sweet but also had a hot bite. I took a couple of specimens

home and have been growing this un-named variety ever since. In Morocco once, on holiday, I found myself in a mini-paradise close to the Algerian border. All around was barren desert but I was in the centre of an oasis of just a few acres. Within a protecting border of date palms were tiny irrigated fields, one full of peppers. These were smooth, slightly elongated, about ten centimetres long. The flesh was deliciously sweet and crisp, but also quite fiery. Needless to say I put a couple of ripe examples in my back-pack and now this delicious capsicum is part of my regular growing plan.

Last March I found myself in French Polynesia. Huahini is one of the Society Islands, close to Tahiti. It is most famous for its vanilla which is grown in profusion. One day I visited a vanilla farmer and spied his vegetable plot. Earlier I had seen women selling metre-long beans in the market and sure enough he had some of these climbers growing in pyramids amongst his other crops. I found some almost ripe beans which he gave me to bring home. In the following weeks before I got back I managed to dry them. I even managed to germinate nine seeds on my greenhouse propagator. All looked very well until I planted them out at the end of May. Even with cloche protection our miserable summer proved too much for them and they died. Some you win, some you lose. But now I have the perfect excuse to return to that Pacific paradise island for more seed. Next time I'll grow them in a polytunnel!

Another new plant for me this year is a chilli I found at a remote place called Cotters Ranch on the edge of the Masai Mara in Kenya in 2006. The gardener showed me a wonderful, pencil thin chilli growing on a large bush. He said the bush had been there as long as he could remember. Needless to say I took a number of ripe fruit home with me and now have a fantastic specimen growing in the green house, yielding a profusion of stiletto-thin 10cm-long fiery chillies.

And then there was the strange cucumber from Zanzibar! I bought some seed in a market on the island but had no idea what variety it was as the contents came in a little plastic case. I chucked a few seed in a pot last April and they all germinated. I grew plants in a greenhouse and treated them like regular cucumbers, pinching out the male flowers. At first all I got were male flowers, but eventually some female flowers formed and I ended up with a handful of pale green/yellow stubby and knobbly cucumbers that had a tough skin but a great taste. Next year I will try again with my remaining seed, only this time I won't remove the male flowers and I will grow under a poly-cloche outside and let them run along the ground. It'll be interesting to see what happens and if I can save some fertile seed this time.

I try and rotate my sowings so every few years I can refresh seed. This autumn I am growing the winter radish Pasque, which I last propagated in 2003. I'll eat most of the crop and leave half a dozen plants to go to seed for harvesting next summer. I still have some seed left and boy does it germinate fast... just three days from sowing to first emergence! But I won't grow any other similar plant to seed in 2008 to avoid cross-pollination. However, crops like beans, peas and tomatoes I find do not easily cross-pollinate so I will have several varieties growing near to each other – but not next door!

This year I saved a bumper crop of my favourite pea, Robinson, so will have enough seed to see me through for the next couple of years plus a few for other collectors. I also have some untried seed I collected in Africa last year of tomatoes and beans. I am keen to try and grow a native east-African bean I bought in a market Tanzania, so watch this space!

Adam Alexander

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