A Decade of Seed Stewardship

Celebrating 10 years of work, we reflect with gratitude at how the Southern Heritage Seed Collective has grown into a well-recognized program locally, regionally, and nationally. Our work saving and sharing regionally adapted seeds has grown into an influential community program with wide-reaching impacts. From providing opportunities for successful food production in home and community gardens, to empowerment for adults with disabilities through our collaborative work at Grow Hub, our seeds are helping grow community resilience. This year is one for reflection and focus, as we think about our future. After 10 years of learning so much about seeds- we recognize their critical role in agricultural biodiversity, food security, climate change, and creating resilient communities. While we are but a small piece of this complex and important work, the impacts of our work are replicable and wide reaching.

“What you are doing is very hopeful, that’s really what I love about your work.”

~Wendy Free, Working Food member, artist, gardener & supporter.
A Snapshot of Our 10th Year

- Acquired hand-built seed processing equipment for improved handling and seed cleaning. All equipment is simple, effective, and accessible for special needs use.
- Featured in a popular permaculture video series with Pete Kanaris receiving over 63,000 views to date!
- Hosted organic farmer Bob Quinn during his visit to Gainesville, showing him our seed operation and sharing mutual love and passion for regional varieties and organic production practices.
- Participated in organization and execution of first ever Southeastern Seed Summit.
- Facilitated Community Seed Stewardship workshop at Organic Seed Growers Conference in Corvallis, Oregon.
- Hand-packed 8,500 individual seed packets for local distribution.
- Talled over 850+ volunteer hours helping in our gardens, seed packing, and events.
- Currently keeping over 500 varieties in our seed collective.
- 468 active paying members that support our seed collective.
- Stewarding 78 local and regional varieties in process of becoming more adapted to our region.
- Hosted 38 classes, workshops, tastings and other events on seeds, gardening, and local food.

Swapping seeds at Florida Earthskills Gathering.

Happy seed packers at Grow Hub!

Improved varieties of landrace cowpeas grown this year with the Dudley Family Corn.

Marc Ketchel (left), Melissa (center) and Bob Quinn (right) at Grow Hub to chat about seed saving and organics.
Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program (SARE)

We’ve partnered on two important projects funded through the Southern SARE program, that will build on previous Southeastern seed work, and help grow a foundation for a resilient regional seed system.

Southeast Regional Networking

Working with Southeastern stakeholders on a project spearheaded by Organic Seed Alliance, we organized and executed the first ever Southeast Seed Summit in November 2019. Several months of planning led to a collaborative effort with the Carolina Farm Stewardship Conference in Durham, North Carolina. We facilitated a full day pre-conference intensive for those specifically interested in issues and opportunities in Southeastern seed, as well as a seed-related workshop in each track at the conference. Melissa was a key planner, and helped facilitate the intensive as well as teach one of the workshop sessions. Follow-up actions and planning are ongoing, with the trajectory towards pursuing funds for planning and strategically implementing a Southeastern Seed Network, and certain priority area activities.

Enhancing Seed Production in the Southeast

A three-year research and education project in collaboration with the University of Florida is underway to investigate both biological and socio-economic issues specific to Southeastern seed production. The overall goal is to find solutions to issues around harvest maturity and seed storage challenges in a hot and humid environment, and understand the socio-economic factors that may encourage or discourage farmers from considering seed production as a potential venture in their farm business. PhD student Tere Davison along with a team of researchers, farmers, and our support at Working Food as the farmer-researcher liaison are part of this project. Four local farms are collaborators: Siembra Farm, Frog Song Organics, The Florida Wildflower Cooperative, and the University of Florida’s teaching farm, Field & Fork. Our seed processing facilities at Grow Hub will be utilized for some of the experiments.
Collaborative Biodiversity Preservation

Many other seed saving organizations need help renewing their diverse collections. Seeds are not meant to be kept on ice for generations. They must be grown out as much as possible in order to evolve and adapt to current conditions, and get into the hands of growers who will steward them. We support this by reproducing crops that are easier for us to grow with our long season and warm climate.

Our own collections are also shared out to others for proliferation. We’ve sent Feaster Family Heirloom Mustard seed to Seed Savers Exchange, and it now appears in their catalog. Southern Exposure Seed Exchange has received some of our varieties for trialing, and recently grew out our Callaloo as it was one of the best in a variety trial. It is now available through their catalog. Sharing seed at seed swaps, classes, and other events help get our material out there. Victory Seeds now carries Everglades tomatoes.

Seed Savers Exchange

Stewards of many thousands of heirlooms from around the country since the 1970’s. They have recently launched the RENEW program that enlists help of growers in other zones. We adopted the Proctor Lima Bean and a Roselle variety from Myanmar that are both easy to grow in our long season and warm climate.

Myanmar Roselle

Seeds of Preservation
International/Roughwood Seed Collection

Keepers of an impressive collection of heirloom and rare seeds, we volunteered to grow out Malawi Malachite Bean, West Indian Burr Gherkin, Brown Speckled Palapye Cowpea and Cypriot Cowpea. Stephen Smith, “The Maize Shaman” stewards hundreds of rare and indigenous corn varieties and has been a great resource for us.

Brown Speckled Palapye Cowpea

Wild Wood Farms

Keepers of very rare indigenous varieties of crops from many tribes throughout North America. This is the only collection we know of, organized by tribe rather than by crop. Beans from our area have been collected by Kris Hubbard, and we were given to us for
grow out. A wild bean from the Miami area’s Miccosukee Tribe called “Green Water Snakes Legs Bean”, and one from the Payne’s Prairie area called “Wacahoota Cattle Hand Bean”. Our efforts to replenish and share back these extremely rare and significant regional beans, are part of a seed rematriation project that proliferates endangered seed and returns them to the surviving tribal members from whom they originally came.

Indigenous seed display at Organic Seed Growers Conference.

The Land Institute

Working on many incredible projects to breed and adapt perennial crops for agricultural use, that could replace more resource intensive annuals. One of their citizen science projects is working with Silphium, a perennial sunflower as a potential oilseed crop to replace canola, soy and sunflower. We shared 10 plants sent to us with 2 other growers that are also providing feedback on how they do in Florida. Growers from around the country are participating, and they have created a great model to explore for participatory engagement around growing, evaluation, and breeding.

A Local Gardener’s Testimonial

“There are so many vegetable varieties that grow well here gives a huge boost to people just learning how to grow vegetables. I really began to grow when I started with the Seed Collective. Before I found out about your seed program, I didn’t know what to grow in what season, or why the fancy tomato and flower seeds I bought didn’t result in any viable harvest.

But what you had were varieties for our area, and they were given out in the appropriate seasons. Then I went to the seed starting workshop you put on, and I was good to go. It was like magic! I would have given up on gardening, it would have been too much failure and not worth the effort. But the Seed Collective is a gateway to success for growing your own food. It’s one of the reasons why I went from a quarter-acre city girl 8 years ago, to a 6-acre wanna-be farmer now.”

Seasonal seed dispersals provide a great way to connect community and share adapted seed and gardening knowledge.
Hundreds of people enjoyed a conference addendum: The Culinary Breeders Showcase.

Melissa was invited to help organize conference session proposals for this biennial conference that convenes farmers, plant breeders, researchers, NGOs and other stakeholders in Corvallis, Oregon. She also presented during one session on Community Seed Stewardship with 3 other community seed organizations from Arizona, Iowa, and California. Through interactive activities the session explored how small and semi-formal seed systems such as seed libraries, community seed banks, and seed cooperatives enhance crop diversity and cultural continuity in ways that larger, formal systems cannot. This was an incredible opportunity to re-connect with seed friends from around the country and network with new ones.

A pre-conference tour of the Willamette Valley provided an opportunity to visit familiar farms from whom we have ordered seeds from, and had a lot of information to share!
Variety Highlights

Dudley Family Heirloom Corn

It is presumed that among the precious seeds and plants the Dudley family brought with them when they moved to Newberry, Florida from South Carolina in 1859, were those of a white field corn, a very hardy variety that thrived in the Southeast’s hot and humid environment.

It was usually planted in June when the spring rains came, according to the old timers. This corn was a treasure, adapted over time by the desires of the family, and shaped by the demands of the land and climate. Plants are incredible that way, changing and responding to their environment alongside their keepers, year after year.

But the Dudley Family Corn is endangered. It’s a tragedy, after so many years of careful tending and adaptation, to lose something this valuable.

This past spring, we collaborated with some of its past keepers and The Family Organic Garden to grow about 3,600 plants representing separate and isolated populations that were reunited in the field. It was a rough year and a lot of work, but we were successful winnowing down about 7 gallons of viable seed in the end, even with some leftover to eat!

We have a few more seasons ahead of us before we can hope to reinvigorate it to its former vigor. Corn may be easy to grow but maintaining its genetic integrity takes work, thoughtfulness, and several successful growing seasons to revive it. Read more about this story on our blog.
Bradford Okra

A great family heirloom from the Bradford Family in Sumter, South Carolina - the same family famous for the Bradford Watermelon.

This okra is a spineless type that rivals the ubiquitous Clemson Spineless, especially since its prized quality is tender pods even at a more mature stage. Like all okras they eventually get tough, but these ones remain tender for much longer.

We’ve become even more enamored with this much maligned southern vegetable after meeting Chris Smith and reading his book *Okra: A Seed to Stem Celebration*. With so many uses for the easy growing, abundant summer crop, we hope to help elevate its qualities rather than shaming it. Embrace the silk (not slime!), roast the seeds, make okra cake, use the tough fibers for paper!

“Turkish Delight” style candies utilizing the silky sticky okra glue for a tasty and chewy candy. Recipe adapted from Chris Smith’s okra book and prepared by Ashely Rella.

Mr. Vernon at Grow Hub holding okra seeds that he helped grow and shell!
Velvet Bean

Not a commonly grown crop, it’s typical use has been for soil building and animal fodder, but we hope to change that! One surviving seed after the rabbits found the other seedlings, did incredibly well for us and produced nearly 2,000 seeds and an impressive amount of biomass. This is an important crop to share widely to promote soil building, but it also can be eaten and has incredible medicinal value. More work needs to be done to understand the best ways to consume this bean as a medicine and food.

Bedie’s Tobasco Pepper

This came to us from Jerome Feaster in Shiloh, Florida where it grew for years after the death of its caregiver and seed sharer, Bedie Rogers. Jerome kept it growing with very minimal care, where it grew in front of the steps of the McIntosh Hardware Store for years. We snagged a few seeds from Jerome’s plant a couple years ago and grew some in our seed garden. It is prolific and beautiful with upright little peppers that look like holiday lights. We concur that it grows with very little care. This adapted and hardy plant will be a keeper for sure.

USDA Improved Landrace Cowpeas

Three lines of improved landrace cowpeas were evaluated by USDA and were given to us through Dr. Carlene Chase at the University of Florida. We grew them up the Dudley Family Heirloom Corn and were able to save quite a bit of seed from them. Cowpeas rarely fail to impress us, and these ones were no exception in showcasing the cowpea’s importance in local foodways for their vigor, productivity, and nematode resistance. We offered two of them in our seed catalog this spring and have been able to share some back to other growers for eating and growing.
Event Highlights

Fall Pumpkin Tasting Pop-Up

In efforts to tie together our programs, we gathered up 4 locally grown pumpkin varieties all of which have been saved over several years by local growers, and some local chefs and businesses. One, the Bellevue Butternut has been stewarded by farmer Tommy Simmons for over 40 years, a cross between Seminole Pumpkin and Butternut squash. Showcased from seed to plate, all these lovely squash were whipped up into so many delicious things from local chefs! Pumpkin kimchi, soup, cheesecake, stuffed pasta shells, fritters, ale, ice cream and more. A recap and photos can be enjoyed on our website.

3rd Annual Southern Seed School

Inspired by Melissa’s attendance a few years ago at Rocky Mountain Seed Alliance’s Seed School Teachers Training in Denver, Colorado, we implemented our own version with a local flavor- Southern Seed School. This two-day event brings together local growers, students, and professors to share their knowledge about seed. Through hands-on activities we lead students through the many facets of seed stewardship. How to grow, select, save, clean, store and test your seeds are some of the topics we explore. This coming year we are changing things up a bit, and will spend a day focusing on efforts to elevate and improve the growing number of seed libraries through the Seed Librarian Summit. You can read more about Southern Seed School on our blog.
Volunteer Spotlight

Kathy Paterson & Bruce Proctor • Lost Valley Farm Shiloh, Florida

Kathy and Bruce have been invaluable supporters of our work in so many ways. Bruce’s exceptional craftsmanship and kindness have provided us with equipment to clean our seeds and display them. Bruce crafted two hand-operated seed cleaners, a large moveable seed drying rack, hand screens, and 3 beautiful retail seed displays. At their farm, Bruce and Kathy converted a portion of their pasture into native wildflower seed production. Coreopsis and liatris were grown and harvested for seed this year, and sold to the Florida Wildflower Cooperative. They also constructed a greenhouse to grow out many thousands of native plants that were donated to Grow Hub. We are so grateful for their support!

Bruce with many thousands of Coreopsis seeds!

Retail display at Ward’s Supermarket.

Accessible seed cleaner being used by Kyle to process Dudley Corn seed.
Acknowledgements

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Grow Hub
Grow Gainesville
Organic Seed Alliance
Morningside Nature Center
Seed Savers Exchange
Seeds of Preservation International
Southern Exposure Seed Exchange
Two Seeds in a Pod Heirloom Seed Company
University of Florida- Department of Environmental Horticulture
University of Florida-Family, Youth and Community Sciences
University of Florida -Field & Fork

Volunteers
Bruce Proctor          Jim & Nancy Milleson
Cydney Robbins        Marian Moss
Doris Klem            Richard Pushaw
Franklin Percival     Ruth Ron
Jennifer Rex          Tom Wootten
Kathy Paterson

“The best approach to building a robust supply of organic seed is by fostering seed systems that are regional, responsive and resilient. A healthy seed system is decentralized, with many decision makers at the table: farmers, breeders, consumers, chefs, seed and food businesses, and others. “

~ Organic Seed Alliance