

California Company Specializes In "Old Grain"

If you're looking for heritage grain lines, Sustainable Seeds Co. (SSC) may have what you need. They offer more than 300 varieties of grain from sesame seed to amaranth to wheat. That's in addition to the 1,400 varieties of vegetables, herbs and flowers they carry. Some of the grains, like Red Clawson wheat, are in such short supply that they are sold in packets of only 25 seeds. Others, like "Streaker" hullless oats, are available in 50-lb. bags.

"We evaluate old varieties for traits to see if they are worth putting into production immediately," says John Fendley, Sustainable Seeds Co. "We may work on some to improve them as we have with Burbank Barley. It hadn't been planted since the 1930's. When we started, it would put out 2 heads per plant. Now we get 15 heads. It took time and a lot of work."

Fendley says the movement back to local production is fueling demand for heritage grains like those offered for sale by SSC. He explains that heritage grains tend to be widely adaptable to local growing conditions.

Most of the varieties SSC works with haven't been grown commercially in decades or longer and are hard to find. He gets seed from the USDA Seed Bank in Idaho, which he describes as "fantastic". Other seed sources include various universities and private collectors, etc.

"Once we got into the business, we started finding people all over the world who would send us stuff, and we send back to them," says Fendley. "We have a guy in Russia who sends us interesting varieties and people

in the Mideast, where many of our grains originated, who send seed."

Often there is a long process between getting seed and offering it for sale. In the case of the seed bank, they may only provide 30 to 40 seeds of a rare variety. Fendley starts them in a greenhouse and transplants them to a garden plot.

"We may get 1/4 lb. of seed the first year and then grow it out the second," he explains. "If we see traits people will want, we continue to grow it out and offer it for sale."

SSC offers mostly heritage varieties, often from the 1800's. Some varieties are newer, like Lewjain wheat, developed in 1982, yet still rare. It's available only in packets of 25 seeds each, and those are limited in quantity. Seed sells for as much as \$7.99 per packet.

"When deciding what to order, consider the end use," advises Fendley. "If the intent is to eat it, then in what? If it's for livestock, what has the highest protein?"

He suggests checking with state universities for what varieties used to be grown in the area. Once a variety has been selected, if it's rare, Fendley encourages customers to save back seed themselves to replant.

"We can only grow so many," he says. "I always recommend saving seed for a rainy day."

If a particular variety adapts well and has good flavor, it may prove popular with local bakers, brewers or livestock producers. Fendley suggests setting aside the highest quality seed for reseeding, the second rank seed for eating and the lower quality seed for animal feed. Some varieties simply may not

work out in flavor, yield or other traits.

"We know what generally does well here or there around the country," says Fendley. "However, there are so many microclimates, even within the same county, that you really have to find what works for you. Just try some."

Because the company has such small quantities of some varieties in stock, Fendley advises placing orders in the fall. Fall seeding also may be recommended for some varieties in particular areas.

He also recommends keeping abreast of new developments. He notes that the University of Oregon is developing barleys for use in breads and other recipes.

"Hairless barley is the next big thing," says Fendley. "Usually you can only use about 30 percent barley in recipes, but they have a flatbread that is 100 percent barley."

SSC does not offer a printed catalog. Selections are available online. Seed can also be ordered at the address listed.



Sustainable Seeds Co. offers more than 300 varieties of heritage grain lines, from sesame seed to amaranth to wheat.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Sustainable Seed Co., P.O. Box 38, Covelo, Calif. 95428 (ph 707 703-1242; toll free 877 620-7333; support@sustainableseedco.com; www.sustainableseedco.com).

Research Brings Old Wheat Lines Back

Stephen Jones is reintroducing old wheat varieties with improved stand, yield and disease resistance along with new varieties designed for specialty production and use. The varieties the University of Washington wheat breeder has developed have attracted interest from home bakers, artisan bakers and chefs.

"Adults and even kids who come through our lab taste samples of bread, and they pick up different flavors like nutmeg or fruit or chocolate," says Jones. "Wheat flavors can vary by the soil, water and climate of where it's raised."

Jones is using that knowledge to develop improved wheat varieties for different areas of the state. His department has released 6 varieties including Bruhl, the most widely grown soft wheat. They have rediscovered an older, high gluten line called Red Russian and reintroduced Canus, an older Canadian line with a very high micronutrient content.

"We are working on wheat lines for the home baker or artisan bread baker who grinds wheat fresh and bakes with it," says Jones. "Commercial wheat lines weren't developed for stone milling, and other features home bakers want. They produce a dependable, consistent commercial flour with a standard taste. Fresh ground flour is more lively and unpredictable with lots of flavor."

Checking out the quality of the baked product is part of the job for Jones. His lab has a full-time baker and baking ovens to test the wheat varieties as they are developed.

Jones has grown every variety planted in Washington since the 1840's, testing them for a wide variety of qualities. Some had disease problems, while others had stand problems, and still others simply didn't make good bread.

"These older types of wheat have beautiful names and stories behind them and can look beautiful in the field," says Jones. "But some

don't do well. All of them were improved at one time. Our strategy is to continue improving the ones that do well."

While he is working with Washington state growers and bakers, Jones says individuals can do similar work in their own areas. He points out that almost every state grew wheat varieties developed for their soils and growing conditions. Many of those old wheat lines still exist.

"Check with your university extension researchers, and ask for old wheat lines grown in your area," says Jones. "If they don't have seed, the USDA may have it. You may only get a few grams of a particular variety, but you can grow it out in your garden, collect the seed and see how it does."

Jones says even a small plot can tell you a lot. If it does well, save the seed and replant to get a larger supply. He encourages growers to try cross breeding to improve the line.



Old wheat varieties with improved stand, yield and disease resistance are being reintroduced by University of Washington wheat breeder Stephen Jones.

"Growers can develop a cross themselves to generate the variation they want," says Jones. "Mixing varieties in the same field lets one do better if the other doesn't do as well."

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