

THE BC SEED GATHERING



UBC Farm Field Tour Credit: Michael Marrapese

uniting community, spurring plans for action

By Shauna MacKinnon

The BC Seed Gathering is not your typical conference. The foundation of the event is a deep commitment to responding to community needs and providing a place for experienced and new seed growers to come together to learn, network and strategize together. The Gatherings are a connection point and forum to discuss what is needed to propel BC seed systems forward.

At the 2012 Gathering plans for the BC Eco Seed Co-op were hatched. The Co-op was launched at the 2014 Gathering and 2017 offered an opportunity to keep building the momentum. The Gathering participants were ready to do just that—the energy and enthusiasm in the room on Friday evening for the official opening was incredible! Perhaps people were already buoyed by conversations during the field tour of the BC Seed Trials at UBC Farm or in the afternoon BC Eco Seed Co-op, Community Seed Organizers, and research focus group sessions. Or maybe folks were just happy to have a chance to relax and connect after a long season. Regardless, the positive energy of the participants set the stage for a productive and inspiring event.

The official opening began with remarks by Kwantlen Polytechnic University’s Elder in Residence Lekeyten and Kwantlen First Nation’s Education Coordinator Cheryl Gabriel, who set the tone by emphasizing the importance of seed work to future generations.

Dr. Michael Bomford, a professor in the Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems at KPU, Dr. Hannah Wittman, Academic Director of the Centre for Sustainable Food Systems at UBC, Harold Steves, Richmond’s longest standing city councillor, and Arif Lalani, the Assistant Deputy Minister for the BC Ministry of Agriculture each spoke on Friday evening. The common theme shared by these speakers was their interest in supporting the BC seed sector and vision for how seed can and should be the foundation of sustainable agriculture in BC.

What set this year’s Gathering apart from past events was this unprecedented level of support from multiple academic institutions and the Ministry of Agriculture. “My goal is clear—I want to help create opportunities for BC farmers and food producers and this includes seed

producers,” said Agriculture Minister Lana Popham. “As a former farmer myself, I know how important the BC seed sector is to BC agriculture. I want to thank our seed growers for the important role they have in ensuring we have food on our tables and jobs in our communities.”

New Assets for the Seed Community

KPU has long supported the BC Seed Gathering as the co-host for all three events. This year, support ratcheted up a notch with the unveiling of the new KPU Seed Lab and introduction of the Garden City Lands where variety trials for seed will take place. These facilities will be put to use to further KPU’s commitment to providing post-secondary education, extension programming and research focused on fostering a sustainable, regional food system. These new assets were developed in response to several years of consulting with partners to identify priorities for research and teaching programs. Research support for the growing organic seed sector was consistently identified as a priority and an appropriate seed testing facility focused on vegetable seeds was a gap that KPU knew they could fill.

The Seed Lab and variety trials at the Garden City Lands are part of KPU’s vision of organic seed production becoming an important component of the agricultural landscape, providing exciting opportunities for growers to have a broad impact on seed diversity and quality.

Similarly, UBC and FarmFolk CityFolk have partnered to deliver the BC Seed Trials where over 25 participating farmers have conducted variety trials on their own farms along with the primary research site at UBC. The BC Seed Trials offer opportunities to strengthen farmers’ skills in trialing crops while also providing much needed data on how bioregionally produced seed performs in comparison to commercial varieties. Ultimately, the trials will help determine which varieties are the best candidates for further breeding and seed production. This project has increased UBC’s interaction with the seed community and laid the groundwork for more research in the future.

Skills Sharing

The participants themselves are a huge part of the draw of the BC Seed Gathering. Over 100 seed-loving folks gathered together this year from as far away as Smithers, Moberly Lake, and the Kootenays. Getting the perspective on seed from these communities enriched the conversation about what resilient BC seed systems really mean. Any Canadian seed event should include conversations about the challenges of growing seed in mountainous or northern climates and the value of dedicating a seed library exclusively to seeds with short days to maturation and cold hardy plants.

The Gathering featured over 25 presenters, each bringing their own unique experience and deep knowledge of their subject area to share with participants. Keynote speakers Steve Peters (part of the staff team for Organic Seed Alli-



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ance in California) and Dan Brisebois (founding member of the Tourne-Sol Co-operative in Quebec) shared their perspectives on the potential of open-pollinated seeds to outperform hybrids and how to improve the business side of growing seed. BC speakers included Mel Sylvestre from UBC Farm on how to integrate seed into your vegetable production, Rupert Adams on growing seed for medicinal plants, and Vanessa Adams on growing seed and propagating native plants for habitat restoration. Many of the presentations and session notes can be downloaded at: bcseeds.org/gathering

Community Seed Advocates Connect

A true highlight of the Gathering was the number of Seedy Saturday and Seed Library organizers that participated. The “community stream” started on Friday afternoon with a strategy meeting and continued with a full day of programming on Saturday. By the final session on Saturday community organizers wrapped up their time together by identifying 11 action points to increase the collaboration and connection between community initiatives and concrete steps to support more resilient seed systems. You can view the 11 steps at:

 bcseeds.org/gathering

What’s Next

The format of the Gathering socials and sessions were designed to generate feedback in the form of individual written portraits, flip charts, and evaluation forms. As we continue to build and shape the BC Seeds program at FarmFolk CityFolk we will be putting all of this information to good use. One thing that came up again and again



Clockwise from top: Mel Sylvestre showcases the UBC Farm seed processing facility; seed plants at the UBC Farm field tour; seed lovers socializing; Kwantlen Polytechnic University's Elder in Residence Lekeyten and Kwantlen First Nation's Education Co-ordinator Cheryl Gabriel. Credit: Michael Marrapese



is the request for more regional Gatherings, training, and networking opportunities. We heard you! Stay tuned for expanded regional training opportunities in 2018.

A big thank you to our co-host KPU, our many sponsors, volunteers, and Gathering Advisory Committee members—without you the event would not have been possible! 🌱

Shauna MacKinnon has been working on food issues for over a decade, from running environmental campaigns to holding the position of BC outpost for the Canada Organic Trade Association. She recently joined the BC Seed Security Program, a collaboration between the Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security and Farm-Folk CityFolk.

KPU Seed Lab

KPU secured funding support from the Canada Foundation for Innovation and the BC Knowledge Development Fund to establish a Seed Testing Lab and Research Farm at their Richmond campus.

The lab is currently under construction and will have equipment such as growth chambers for germination tests, optical seed sorters, seed driers, density sorters, and gravity sorters. The research farm will provide a site where variety trials, new crop development research and production systems research can be carried out. The type of research and services the lab can provide will assist in the development of performance metrics and research-based best management practices for seed production in BC to ensure and enhance the quality and diversity of seeds offered.

The lab is expected to be operational by Spring 2018 with the aim to begin conducting analysis on 2018 crops. Growers and retailers can connect with KPU to let them know how they can best be supported. For further information contact Rebecca Harbut:

 Rebecca.Harbut@kpu.ca



Top: Kale at UBC Farm. Above: Aabir Dey National Program Manager and Western Ontario Coordinator The Bauta Family Seed Initiative. Credit: Michael Marrapese



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