

# Local seed initiative shifts focus to economics

## Seed security won't happen if it doesn't pay the bills

by **RONDA PAYNE**

VANCOUVER – FarmFolk/CityFolk is receiving \$100,000 over two years under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership to promote the production of BC-grown vegetable seed.

Chris Thoreau, program co-ordinator for the Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security with FarmFolk/CityFolk, said the funding will help the Vancouver-based not-for-profit address the business side of seed production.

"[We've] been sort of switching from more diversity

and community-oriented projects, which are still important, to a more business-focused perspective," says Thoreau. "Farmers and growers are interested in seed production but there's a big gap in understanding the economics of it."

The new funding complements a larger grant of \$130,000 from the Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC. Vancity has also contributed to the mobile seed cleaner making up part of the project.

The funding will support development of a mobile

seed-processing unit to help small and mid-sized seed farmers across BC process seed efficiently and affordably. It will also extend seed production training through focused in-person sessions and webinars and help new entrants and small businesses plan and prepare to manage a new seed enterprise.

"The seed enterprise budget spreadsheet allows farmers to actually calculate how much input, labour, resources (and) time goes into producing a seed crop and what their prospective return on that is," says

Thoreau.

The popular Seedy Saturday events across the province will also see support to launch in more communities with shared resources that can be used throughout BC.

### Seedy Saturday kickstart

Dan Jason, owner of Salt Spring Seeds, has been in the seed business since the 1980s. He says Seedy Saturdays are a great way for growers to get started in seeds. The events have been happening for close to three decades.

"Anybody in their local community can easily see when their community has their Seedy Saturday and that's a good time to check out anything to do with seed," he says.

Jason also recommends attending farmers' markets to see what vegetables are being sold to determine the demand for seeds.

Jason inspired Adam Schick of Linnaea Farm on Cortez Island to begin seed production when the two met in 1998.

"It's more important to be a diversified farm than it's ever been and growing a seed crop is important in terms of what we're losing [in local seed varieties] but also as part of an economically diversified operation," says Schick. "The seed business is endless. Like most agriculture, it's built on small growth over a lot of years. Enough little things piled together and all of a sudden you have something."

Schick sells seed through Salt Spring Seeds, the BC Eco

Seed Co-op and on farm. He's been selling seed commercially for five years, and sales remain a small part of his farming income.

Thoreau knows economic opportunities aren't the only reason growers will sell seed, but he says if they can't make the economics work, seed production won't happen.

"One of our approaches ... is developing our own seed production systems so we can actually grow seed, test some of these economic models that we're sharing with farmers and generate revenue for our programs through seed sales," he says.

Jason says opportunities exist for interested growers.

"There's really room for good seed growers right now. People could make a viable living doing that for sure," he says. "I'm always excited to find someone that has things that are good that we don't offer yet. It's a matter of a conversation."

Growing something you love is Schick's recipe for success.

"Start with something really simple and also something you really love to eat and also think about what does your piece of earth that you're managing have to offer," he says.

He adds that growing seed is part of food security, which is something both Jason and Thoreau agree with.

"Our vegetable seed is all imported from the US and across the world, and when we can produce a lot of it here, it gives us more security and not be so reliant on external sources," says Thoreau.

For more information about growing seed and tools to help, see [www.bcseeds.org](http://www.bcseeds.org).



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