

Veg on the Edge

Report: Heritage Seed Library (Garden Organic)

Representatives from HSL attended the 14th Spanish Biodiversity fair between the 4th and 6th of October in Villanueva de la Vera (the name translates as Newtown on the Edge, hence the title). This event is a chance for the 25 regional Spanish seed saving organizations to come together, share seeds, attend workshops and socialize. The event is moved around the country every year to give a boost to each regional group.

The main activity of the 2 days was meeting, swapping seeds and sharing experiences, but there were also workshops, included ones on grafting fruit trees, seed saving, ethical finance, visits to the local gardens, the role of women in agro-biodiversity, growing and drying peppers and a round table on the past, present and future of traditional varieties in the region.

Red de Semillas is more or less entirely run by volunteers. Some of the individual networks may get individual project funding to pay someone for a while, but the rest is all done through the commitment of individuals. The cost of the event was partly realized through crowdfunding, which raised 600 euros towards the final total. There was also a volunteer run bar and food stall which, for the good of the cause, we patronized heavily! There were also stalls selling food, plants, massages, hippy tat etc and on Saturday, a stage played host to theatre performances and music. It is a small town, with a population not much over 2000, and having an event of this size must have been a boost to the local economy. The town council which hosted the event had no money to support it, but they gave free use of a venue as a gift in kind. Many of the townsfolk gave use of their houses to accommodate the participants for free.



Villanueva de la Vera and the mountains

An interesting point noted was the age demographic. Participants were in the main fairly young and when I mentioned this to someone, he described a big movement back to the countryside as young people have drifted back home as the recession hit. They are then getting into cultivating the land and growing crops for food. Possibly this is why there were so many questions regarding seed quality control – at HSL we rely on a fairly old and knowledgeable gardening population, who have been doing it for years. There seemed a real focus on exchanging knowledge as well as seed, both informally when swapping seed, and through the workshops.



Talking about varieties and swapping seeds and experiences

Activity reports

Seed exchange

There was lots of interest in the seeds from the UK and the seeds and growing techniques were shared with many visitors. We have returned with a modest amount of seed (much less than what we took out, thankfully!) and I will be interested to plant some of these Spanish varieties at home and see how they grow.



HSL stand (left) and Canary Island stand (right) at the Spanish Biodiversity Fair

Garden visits.

We walked through the area on the edge of town where people have plots of land for food production. These are larger than what we would consider to be allotments, but are below the size of a smallholding. The typical one would have a dozen or so fruit trees, a small building/outhouse and an area for vegetable growing. The area has a special microclimate, being on the high, hot plain of central Spain, but

on the edge of a large mountain range, bringing a cooler and wetter influence. This enables a wide variety of fruit trees to be grown. As we were walking, we saw trees of oranges, lemons, persimmons, figs, apples, quinces, olives and grapevines, fruits which are usually geographically separate.



Lin caught scrumping tomatoes!



Example of one of the 'huertas'

Seed Saving workshop

This was very interesting to see, as I deliver a similar workshop to groups in the UK. The workshop leader spoke for 2 hours and fielded some very interesting and in-depth questions from the crowd. It was reassuring to see how similar the approach was and the advice and questions. There was a good level of knowledge among the participants, with lots of very specific questions from the audience about their own particular experiences. It was very well attended too – there must have been at least 50 people listening intently.

Advice on not saving from bolted lettuces, how long to leave a cucumber to rot etc. seemed almost lifted from my mouth! There were lots of props on the table to demonstrate particular points.

Some things I had not considered were saving seed from healthy tomato plants late in the season, as you will know that that plant is resistant to diseases. A technique for processing leek seed was demonstrated; gentle use of a rolling pin to break up the chaff. Chalk was suggested as another dessicant material. Seed longevity info seemed to differ from that which we say – possibly because I am going on how things behave in our cold store – tomato seed longevity seemed particularly low at 4-5 years and broad beans quite high at 8 years. Maybe this is due to a hotter, drier climate!



Seed saving workshop

Interesting points	Possible action
Lots of interest from people about how we run, how the seed guardian thing works, how we quality control all that seed from different sources	Write a short piece to share about how guardians work
Lots of interest in photos of our operations	Set up Flickr group
Spent a lot of time explaining the basics of what we are, partly because I missed the chance to present to the Friday group	Paragraph from each participating group to be distributed before
Lots of good teaching resources, looks like many of the regions had their own guides, showing particular varieties from their regions as well as seed saving instructions.	Swap resources at future events – pref. not too text-heavy stuff!
An in depth event in each region provides knowledge, skills and inspiration to each area in turn, as well as a host of new varieties to try. Each region is very autonomous regarding maintenance of their own varieties, which seems to be mostly done through networks of volunteer growers.	A UK meta-swap bringing together all the regional ones, held in a different place each yr? Combined with a potato day/skill share?