

Submission for 12-19-05 Ann Arbor News “Your World” column:

Trends in agriculture are changing. Farm acreage in Washtenaw County has decreased by over 50% since 1950, and the average size of farms has increased by approximately 41%. With increased size and mechanization has come improved efficiency and yields, but also a decrease in diversity of crops raised. Another trend is a reliance on hybrids (which can only be purchased, as they can't reproduce naturally).

Monocultures of crops are easy targets for pests and diseases—as was the case during the potato famine in Ireland when one type of over-planted potato was wiped out by a fungus. Also a concern is the permanent loss of genetic diversity as traditional varieties are replaced by hybrids.

Many less advanced agricultural systems still rely on a diversity of crops. For instance, in the Andes, farming communities use about 3,000 different varieties of potatoes, and in Java farmers may plant more than 600 species in a single home garden. Recently there has been an interest in increasing diversity here: to lessen vulnerability (and reliance on chemicals), and to prevent extinction of traditional seed stocks.

For instance, Project Grow of Ann Arbor is offering classes next March and April on growing heirloom vegetables and saving their seeds. Participants can become members of the Project Grow “Seed Savings and Loan Association.”

This February, Project Grow will have a Seed Swap. And/or, you can mail-order traditional and open-pollinated (vs. hybrid) seeds—for a list of companies see the Winter 2005 newsletter on Project Grow's website, at www.projectgrowgardens.org.

Project Grow is currently recruiting gardeners to assume responsibility for growing one or more of their heirloom vegetable varieties—they will even provide the garden plot. Next May (the 13th and 20th) will be their annual plant sale. For more information on Project Grow programs, call #734-996-3169.

If you'd like to buy heirloom vegetables, farmer's markets are a place to look. The Garden Works Farm at the Ann Arbor Farmer's Market sells some, as do the following “subscription” farms (members pay a yearly fee for shares of the harvest):

- Tantre Farm, Chelsea (734-475-4323).
- Garden Patch Farm, Pinckney (734-878-2920, www.gardenpatchfarm.com).
- Community Farm of Ann Arbor, Chelsea (734-433-0261, www.communityfarma2.org)

Relying on hybrids and fewer varieties has also been the trend in animal husbandry. For instance, 99% of all turkeys raised in the U.S. today are the “Broadbreasted White.”

Local exceptions include the Harnois Farm in Ann Arbor (734-449-7172), which offers heritage turkeys at Thanksgiving, and their chicken eggs, laid by heritage breed chickens, are available at Jefferson Market and Fresh Seasons. A local mail-order business offers heritage turkeys—see www.heritagefoodsusa.com or call 734.213.7653. And the Garden Patch Farm (see above) sells heritage Dutch Belted Galloway beef.

Note that as well as facilitating genetic preservation, traditional varieties are often raised following organic and free-range practices, which have a host of additional benefits.

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