

Seeds of Change

The new film *Hijacked Future* offers a fresh take on seed preservation

By JASON BROWN

Had a piece of toast or two this morning? Or maybe you're just peeling back the waxed paper on a fresh muffin to have with your coffee right now. But what exactly does that have to do with biodiversity in Ethiopia? That's a story related to the pedigree of the wheat that went into your baked item. In the 1950s, the majority of the Canadian wheat crop—composed largely of a single strain called marquis—was lost to a Rust disease. Canadian wheat production, monocropped and therefore particularly vulnerable to catastrophe, was only saved after the search for an appropriate alternative turned up a suitable strain that had been traditionally adapted to its environment by generations of farmers in Ethiopia. Durham wheat saved the day.

The story of marquis and durham wheat is recounted in local filmmaker David Springbett's new documentary *Hijacked Future*, where this Canadian wheat crisis functions as a kind of "history repeating itself" parable—because, as precarious as things were in the 1950s, they're even worse now.

Traditionally, farmers worldwide have protected themselves from the unpredictable threats posed by pests, disease and weather by diversifying their crops, allowing for local differences and saving and sharing their most successful seeds. This is how farming used to work before big business got into the agricultural market. These days, power has been taken away from farmers by a handful of corporations who've all but cornered the market on pesticides, fertilizers and—most ominous of all—seeds. As a consequence, there is less biodiversity in North American farming than ever before. Add the rising stress



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By donation • 250-381-0585
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of climate change into the mix and we've now got, in the words of one of the specialists interviewed in Springbett's film, "the perfect storm" for an agricultural crisis. *Hijacked Future*, which is being screened this Friday night, tracks the history of this dangerous change and profiles several attempts to preempt the threats posed to the security of the food in our grocery stores by corporate control of agriculture.

"We went back to Ethiopia, which is a centre of diversity with ancient agricultural tradition," Springbett explains. "Crops there have co-evolved with pests and environmental conditions. It's property rights and contracts that now prevents North American farmers from doing the same."

Hijacked Future makes reference to the now-famous case of Percy Schmeiser, the Saskatchewan farmer who was successfully sued by Monsanto for saving and replanting that company's patented Roundup-ready canola seeds after they blew in from a neighbouring field and cross-contaminated his own crop. Farmers who save or share patented seeds—or who are just accused of this—are liable to face similarly devastatingly expensive litigation. The pressure is on to buy new seeds every year, which has resulted in not only decreased profits for farmers

but also in the surrender of crop control to the hands of a few corporations. "With this new regime of intellectual property rights," Springbett continues, "what used to be the commons is now privately owned. And seeds are the perfect example of this."

Hijacked Future also considers the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway, the so-called "doomsday vault" tunnelled into the side of a barren mountain where samples of all existing agricultural seed varieties in the world are kept as a last-case defence against global agricultural collapse and the consequent loss of thousands of years of food heritage. According to Springbett, Svalbard is good thing—"with some qualifications." The Norwegian vault "is static," he says. "It's a snapshot in time. Life is messy and ragged around the edges; the seeds that are in there now may not be as effective in 10 years when the world itself has changed." The better system, he says, is one that is "in situ, where the crops are planted out and then stored every year." This way, the seeds are able to constantly adapt to new challenges.

And where exactly is there such a system, you may well ask, as you finish your muffin. Well, the perfect model turns out to be in Ethiopia, where a national program to save and distribute crop seeds was created after a bloody civil war took its toll on the country's food-production systems. Science now works hand-in-hand with local farmers—not to force them to plant a particular patented variety but to assist them in diversifying their crop, and helping to select and preserve their seeds every year.

Now there's an idea well worth patenting. **M**

Bernie and Marti Martin-Wood of Two Wings Farm will lead a solutions-based discussion following the screening.