

Digging Into the Past: The Historical Significance of Three Crops in Vermont

by Cheryl Bruce, VOF Staff

Many people who grow their own food feel a connection to the land through their self-sufficiency. When harvesting a potato or an ear of corn, there is a strong connection that links the modern day gardener to Vermont's agricultural past. In a time that was built upon localized food systems, rural farm families shared farm chores, equipment, crop harvests, and seeds. The result was strong communities with strong agricultural roots. Potatoes, beans, corn, turnips, peas, and squash were all staples of the rural diet, with locally adapted varieties that grew well in our Northern climate.

One crop that plays a big part in Vermont's agricultural history is corn. There are 5 types of corn: sweet corn, popcorn, flour corn, dent corn, and flint corn. Of these, the most well known by consumers is sweet corn. Popcorn, one of the oldest and hardiest of all corn types, has a very starchy center enclosed with a hard shell. This hard shell allows a significant amount of pressure to build up upon heating, before the kernel finally pops. Flour corn, or soft corn, is mostly starch and grinds down to a smooth and silky consistency, which lends itself well to the making of tortillas. Dent corn is aptly named due to the crease or 'dent' in the kernel. This starchy corn is used for livestock feed as corn silage. Most of the corn seen growing along Vermont's roadsides during the summer months is dent corn. Flint corn is a hardy northern type that has a gritty, 'flinty' texture when ground. This texture is due to a high percentage of a mineral called opaline. Flint corn has a significant historical significance not just in New England, but also here in Vermont.

In the not too distant past, there were many local varieties of flint corn grown throughout the Northeast. In Vermont, several varieties were grown around the state, each one highly localized. Today, Vermont farmers are growing and restoring some of these old varieties. Tom Stearns, of High Mowing Seeds in Wolcott, came across an old local variety 10 years ago when first settling in the town of Calais. Tom was given the seed by a neighbor and after growing it one season, wanted to trace it back to the source. The seed had been passed from one farmer to another in the area, but the road finally led him to the family of Roy Fair. It is said that Roy's family had found a jar of seed in the basement, although another version of the story recounts that the seed was actually found in a wall. The seed was grown out and then shared with local farmers, saving it from near extinction. Tom named the variety Roy's Calais Flint corn, paying homage to the source of that seed. It has also been called Abenaki Calais Flint which is a tribute to the Native Americans who had originally given the seed to the settlers in colonial times.

Tom shared the seed with Fedco Seeds in Maine. Fedco needed a supplier to grow the seed and that's when Jack Lazor entered the picture. Jack and his wife Anne operate Butterworks Farm in Westfield, Vermont. On this certified organic farm, they milk 45 Jersey cows to produce yogurt and cream, and grow a diversity of grain crops. Jack had already been growing flint corn for several years before supplying to Fedco. When first settling in Westfield 35 years ago he trialed several flint and dent corn varieties, such as Gaspé Yellow, Rhode Island White Cap, Longfellow, and King Phillip. Now he is working to improve Calais Flint. Although the variety is



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an early producer with a beautiful grain, it has weak stalks and is subject to lodging. Jack uses selection to build stronger plants. He only selects ears from plants that remain standing and he chooses only the best 10-12 inch ears for the seed stock.

Flint corn must be harvested by hand. When the corn is 90% ripened, the stalks are cut down and taken into the barn to dry. The corn will then ripen in the husk. In times past, communities would engage in 'husking bees', which were popular social events on American farms that combined both work and pleasure. The goal was to de-husk the corn as quickly as possible. As a bonus, if someone came across an ear with red kernels, they were able to kiss the person of their choice.

Another crop that brought the community together was the bean. Dry beans were grown on a large scale as a commodity crop in Vermont. The entire bean plant was harvested and hung to dry on cut spruce trees which served as a drying rack. Threshing machines, used to separate the bean from the pod, were a staple in every community and shared among farmers in late fall after harvest.

One bean that has historical significance in Vermont is the True Red Cranberry Pole Bean. This bean remains one of the oldest varieties, cultivated since colonial times. As its name suggests, it is round and bright red like a cranberry. Tom Stearns sourced this seed from farmers in Lyndonville, and has helped make it commercially available again. It is one of the only dry beans of a trailing pole type that can be grown in Vermont. Pole beans generally have a higher number of growing days to maturity than bush bean types. In addition, dry beans are harvested one month after ripening, adding to the amount of time needed to produce it. Vermont's growing season is simply not long enough. However, the True Red Cranberry is a short season bean that exhibits fast growth and is high yielding.

There is so much variety within beans themselves, as can be seen in the vast array of colors and patterns they exhibit. The fact that beans store well and are aesthetically pleasing when kept in jars on the kitchen shelf has made it easy for the seed to be passed down over generations.

Yet another crop that has a long history in Vermont is the potato, which was commercially produced on a commodity level in the 1800's. Vermont grown potatoes were used to make two main products: potato whiskey and starch for sizing, used in fabric production. This starch was used throughout New England in its numerous textile mills and its production was a big part of the state's economy.

Of course, potatoes were also grown as a food crop. In the 1850's, when the potato industry in the U.S. began experiencing the effects of the potato blight, breeders began focusing on developing new varieties. Old potato varieties, considered depleted, were crossed with hardier wild varieties from Mexico and South America to improve the genetics. One of the first new varieties that emerged was 'Early Rose,' introduced in 1861. 'Early Rose' was grown widely throughout Vermont at one time, but is now believed to be out of production.



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Over 80 of these newly developed potato varieties originated in Vermont through the work of commercial breeders. One of these breeders, Albert Breesee of Hubbardton, introduced several varieties including 'Breesee's Prolific' and 'Breesee's King of the Earlies.' Another well-known Vermont potato is 'Green Mountain,' introduced in 1885. It's a high starch, late season potato perfect for baking and known for its superior flavor. Older Vermonters remember this variety and there has been renewed interest among farmers and gardeners in growing it.

There has been an increasing disconnect between people and food systems in the last 50 years, with the shift from local to industrialized agriculture. Locally adapted, open pollinated varieties were dropped by seed companies and replaced with higher yielding hybrids. Hybrids have brought many prolific, disease resistant, short season varieties to the farmer, but as a result there was a tremendous loss of the old fashioned varieties of the past.

When food crops are as integrated into daily life as corn, beans, and potatoes were in Vermont, relationships are developed with food and the local landscape. Due to a renewed interest in local agriculture systems, farmers are returning to the heirloom varieties of the past and working to improve them through selective breeding. With a shift in the importance of localized food systems among consumers, we may see a return of the strong communities that resulted from the local agricultural systems of the past.

Thank you to Jack Lazor of Butterworks Farm in Westfield & Tom Stearns of High Mowing Seeds in Wolcott for providing historical and cultural information on Roy's Calais Flint corn and True Red Cranberry Pole Bean. Thank you also to Virginia Nickerson, PhD., who provided significant historical information on beans and potatoes from her dissertation titled 'Continuity and Resistance: Central Vermont Farmer's Motivations for Cultivating Heirloom Vegetables.'

NOFA-VT's On-Farm Energy Efficiency Program Gets Going

by Enid Wonnacott, Executive Director

Energy use on Vermont's organic dairy farms accounts for about five percent of operating costs, with an annual cost of \$6 - \$10,000. This operating cost may be reduced by fifty percent, or more, through greater efficiency and renewable energy strategies, enhancing annual farm profitability by as much as ten percent. Because the up-front cost of purchasing more energy efficient equipment can be a major impediment for farmers, NOFA-VT extended our loan program with Chittenden Bank's Socially Responsible Banking Fund to develop a low-interest loan to finance energy efficient equipment. The loan will allow a farmer to install equipment with little or no up-front investment and to make payments from the electricity savings generated.

Willie Gibson, NOFA-VT Farm Advisor, and Dan Smith, energy consultant and owner of Integrated Energy Solutions in Montpelier, have teamed up to pilot this project. They will start by implementing efficiency measures on organic dairy farms, starting with the installation of variable speed pumps, a technology that many farmers are interested in because of immediate energy/cost savings. We are currently working with 25 farmers who are interested in installing variable speed drive vacuum pump motors. The first farm loan will be made this week. By end of 2007, we hope to have 25-40 variable speed pumps installed. In addition, Willie and Dan are researching energy savings on other energy efficiency and alternative energy technologies including solar panels, wind turbines, hydro power, and small scale methane digestion. The primary goal of the project is to enhance the profitability of Vermont organic farms by maximizing energy efficiency and conservation, and reducing on-farm fossil fuel use. If you are interested in more information, or participating in the program, please contact the office.

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