



A SEED of an Idea and How It GREW

by Phran Novelli

DURING THE 1993-94 GROWING SEASON, the first HPS/MAG Seed Exchange began with about 200 types of seed. Today more than 1,000 types of seed are donated, volunteers contribute thousands of work hours, and volumes of gardening knowledge are shared.

Here's how it grew.

In the Beginning... There Was Carol

"You can't do a story on the seed exchange without crediting **Carol Kueppers**—she did it all herself and made it look easy," says **Lorraine Wallace**. Credit to Carol Kueppers was heard over and over as stories unfolded about the unique undertaking that is the annual HPS/MAG Seed Exchange.

Jean Schumacher agrees wholeheartedly, "Carol was the impetus for this wonderful, wonderful thing! We worked in Carol's living room and dining room, sitting on the floor cleaning seed, and we stored it in her basement. We called her the Mother of the Seed Exchange."

"It's true," Carol said, recalling her efforts with pride recently when asked about the early history of the Seed Exchange. But she insists that it was Jean Schumacher and **Joanne Walkovic**, cofounders of HPS/MAG, who really initiated the exchange.

Paula Kaplan, a former HPS/MAG President in the early years, recalls, "The first seed exchange was in Carol's home and she did a great deal more than anyone else. She understood what it meant to take on a project of this complexity and get the job done."

Lorraine Wallace agrees. The first HPS/MAG talk she ever attended was one Carol gave about seeds, "Carol just made it so simple for us all because she had it down to a science."

And How It Grew...

After Carol, Jean took over the list, and collected the seeds, which then went to **Peg Elliot**'s basement for sorting and packing. Jean says, "Peg had a handyman who built special tables for the seed sorting. But, you wouldn't believe how we were working, it was a small basement, with all of us and all our stuff around the washer and dryer and her husband's workbench... and each year the Seed Exchange was growing larger and larger."

"Enter Lorraine," says Paula. "We were having a meeting at Peg Elliot's house in the summertime. Lorraine came in cold—she had schedules for intake, cleaning, packaging, mailing, defining who does what and in what order."

"I was recruited by **Beverly Fitts**," Lorraine recalls, "she felt the Seed Exchange needed a chair, everything was being done by hand, in paper bags, everyone had to move from house to house, typing was done piecemeal, etc."

The Move to the Henry Foundation

Creating a central location was one of Lorraine's major goals. "We were limited by the size of someone's house where we'd gather, it also limited the number of volunteers. That made it hard for more people to join in, a bit intimidating." In 1997, she approached the Henry Foundation about housing the Seed Exchange workshops. "Once the seed operation moved to the larger Henry Foundation space, it opened up, so everyone was welcome," Lorraine

explained. "It's like a quilting bee—everyone shares stories and recipes and you hear garden tips. It's a welcoming atmosphere, and anyone can walk in at any time and never feel like you are intruding."

"There's enough room to clean, sort, and store the seeds, and the best thing it did was create a camaraderie," Jean said. "It's a very good place for a new member to get to know people."

HPS/MAG Seed Exchange Facts *Fifteen Years of Growth*

1993-94
200 donations

2008-09
1,084 donations
66 donors

Computerization

Carol Kueppers was ahead of the technology curve, so the Seed Exchange was computerized from the start. Over the years, Jean Schumacher, then **Ken Karger**, reworked it. In recent years, the process was further refined and streamlined under current Seed Exchange Chair **Gene Spurgeon**, who says, “2005-06 was my first season as chair and the first to use the current packaging and labeling system. The next season, I revamped the catalog format and worked with **Jim Bobb** to establish our current database.”

Contributions and the number of people who order seeds varies from year to year. Lorraine notes with relief, “The amount of paper and data entry has greatly diminished thanks to Jim’s and Gene’s efforts.”

Lorraine expressed appreciation for how far the Seed Exchange has come, from cramped basements to its current efficient operation, during Gene’s years at the helm. Lorraine jokes, “I always called myself the Seed Queen, but now Gene’s the Seed King.”

Thank Goodness for the Internet

Computers also make research on nomenclature and propagation faster, easier, and more reliable. “In ‘the old days,’ nomenclature was verified by sitting around the table at the Henry Foundation with piles of reference books,” says **Kay Johns**, current HPS/MAG President. The Royal Horticultural Society has long been relied upon as the main source. Kay adds, “Now, using their website www.rhs.org.uk, we always have the newest information available.”

Donating Seeds to the Exchange

Today, you go to www.hardyplant.org and fill in an electronic submission form, or print it, and send it by mail, “or we have a third option,” Lorraine happily

reports. “We send previous years’ donors a list of seeds they donated in years past, so if you’re sending the same seeds, all you have to do is check off a box.”

All seeds are sent to Lorraine, who checks the submissions to see which might need refrigeration or cleaning. “Pulpier seeds—usually woodies—may need cleaning and drying,” Lorraine notes.

Many plants in my garden are unusual or difficult to obtain. Others are old-fashioned favorites. Saving seed is a great way to share these plants with other gardeners, even people I have never met. If I think it is a good plant, I want other people to have it, too. The HPS/MAG Seed Exchange provided the perfect way to achieve this.

—Charles Cresson

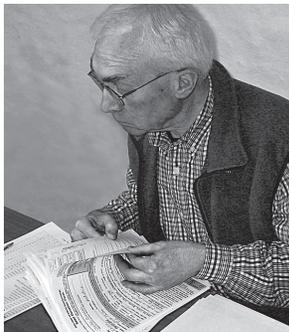
Gardening Fun in the Middle of Winter

After the intake process, the seeds are taken to the Henry Foundation for further cleaning, sorting, and storing until the orders are filled, packed, and mailed during January/February work sessions.

This is where the Seed Exchange epitomizes the essence of HPS/MAG’s mission, to encourage gardeners—from beginners to professionals—to learn more about horticulture and to share skills, knowledge, and plants with each other.

“Most fanatical gardeners welcome an opportunity to do something in the dead of winter related to growing things,” says **Joan Haas**, a former Seed Exchange Chair.

Kay Johns agrees, “One of the most important aspects of Seed Exchange has not changed—sitting around the table at the Henry Foundation as we clean, pack, and label seeds for our members. We have every level of seed involvement present—from novices to people who are perfectly capable of writing a book on seed collection and growing.”



Gene Spurgeon reviews seed donation forms.

Photo by Beisey Hansell

As Joan puts it, “Being around people who have germinated trees and shrubs from seed, and talking to them to learn the secret of their success, is an inspiration to many members, who can then say to themselves, ‘that doesn’t sound too hard—I can do it too.’”

Alicia Thomas-Glenn, who joined HPS/MAG in recent years, describes what prompted her to volunteer, “I first got interested in the seed exchange because I think to really know a plant, it helps to be able to recognize everything about it—leaves, fruit, seeds. What better way to get to know them than to have them labeled in front of you and to be working with them? Plus, so many people there are so knowledgeable about the different processes needed for germination—scarification, stratification, heat, etc.”

Since the work is done in the heart of winter, weather is always a consideration for volunteers, but as Alicia recalls

Roguing Out

Popular donations in the Seed Exchange such as *Papaver somniferum* ‘Lauren’s Grape’ and *Nicotiana* ‘Green Mix’ came from seeds developed by members through conscious selection of specific qualities. To develop your own favorite seed strain, when plants bloom, simply continue to pull out any that do not exhibit the color or other characteristics that you seek to perpetuate.

Nancy Ondra explains her experience. “There are some unique seed strains, such as the green-flowered nicotiana that now goes by the name Nancy Ondra’s ‘Green Mix’. I was growing the hybrid ‘Lime Green’ and the species *Nicotiana langsdorffii* in the same area. They crossed to produce plants with blooms that were the rich green of the species but larger and more open—not quite like ‘Lime Green’, but not like the species, either. I donated the seed and it’s appeared on the list every year, which is a good thing for me, since I lost my original strain when I moved to a new garden. I was very happy to be able to get it back through the HPS Exchange.”

Seed Storage Tips

"I air dry most seeds until the capsules open, then put them in paper coin envelopes. The envelopes are then stored in a closed container with a moth ball to keep out insects that would eat certain seeds." Of course, different plants have different requirements. "Some seed capsules need to be dried in a closed container, such as a paper bag, since they shoot seed when ripe. Others, such as hellebores, are best refrigerated. Some, such as camellias lose viability quickly if they dry out, so those are refrigerated in bags of moist peat."

—Charles Cresson,
seed donor since 1996

Tips for Beginning Seed Propagators

"Try those you can sow in situ, they're most reliable, and that almost guarantees some success which gives you encouragement to keep trying others. Poppies are a great way to start." The first year that 'Lauren's Grape' poppies were offered, Lorraine Wallace sowed them in May, "so, of course, they didn't bloom at the regular time, but they did germinate and came up in November. The glaucous foliage was lovely in autumn."

Start seed outside in a pot. "That's my tried and true way of germinating—eventually it will grow. It's the lazy man's way, but I've found it's also one of the most reliable." She also starts seeds in baggies with vermiculite to save space when stratifying seeds. "You can try all kinds of special things, cold care for hellebores, etc.," Lorraine says, "but by putting it in a pot outside, at least it has a better chance of surviving the neglect I give it."

Charles Cresson has this advice for newcomers to seed starting: "I think **large seeds are easier since they are less delicate.** Camellias are a good example. Also **annual seeds that mature fast,** in a year. Perennials and woody plants may require overwintering with protection if too small to plant out the first year."

traveling to Gladwyne from her home over the bridge in New Jersey, "The first time I went, it was snowing, and it was challenging getting there. But once inside the Henry Foundation, you completely forgot about what was going on outside, and you just concentrated on getting the seed clean and ready for packaging."

Why Bother Saving and Sharing Seeds?

Joan Haas, who has been growing from seed since she was a teenager, says, "I have a big garden, so saving seed has allowed me to fill the garden with flowers for less money. Also, seed saving preserves seed diversity for generations to come."

Gene Spurgeon explains the quiet and contemplative gifts it affords, saying, "The pleasures of working with and propagating from seed do not include instant gratification. They do include experiencing the cycles of plant life, working at a simple repetitive task that contains little stress, and many potential rewards."

Charles Cresson sums up the very essence of his own participation and likely speaks for many others: "I've been donating since 1996 or so. This year, I am down to about 60 donations, from a one-time high of 161. Many plants in my garden are unusual or difficult to obtain. Others are old-fashioned favorites. Saving seed is a great way to share these plants with other gardeners, even people I have never met. If I think it is a good plant, I want other people to have it too. The HPS/MAG Seed Exchange provided the perfect way to achieve this."

Rob Broekhuis, a member who donates 20 to 30 different types of seeds a year, says that about 75% of the perennials on his half-acre were grown from seed. Rob also spoke of friendships, as well as flowers, found through the Seed Exchange. "Nancy Ondra gave me some seeds which are the parents of some of my best hellebores today, and that's one of the best side benefits of the HPS/MAG, meeting fellow gardeners and making friends."

Nancy Ondra, who was on the Board of Directors when the Seed Exchange began, has been a donor ever since. She emphasizes the unique plants she's been able to find, "One of the things that makes the HPS/MAG Seed Exchange so special," says Nancy, "is that it allows gardeners access to seeds they wouldn't find anywhere else."

Popular Plants Come and Go

As with fashion and food trends, flowers and plants ebb and flow in popularity, and Lorraine recalls, "Daturas were very, very popular in the beginning, and people start to think something's old hat so they don't send it in any more. Then, all of a sudden, we'll have a bad winter and lots of people will lose a plant, and they all want that seed back. So, we take all comers because you never know what will suddenly be in demand."

It's hard to predict what seeds you can expect to find in the HPS/MAG catalog, but as Lorraine explains, they include "garden-worthy plants including tender perennials, annuals, and woody plants." She added, "Tender perennials are very popular—the new trendy things seem to come in that category, where you're stretching the zone to grow them in the Mid-Atlantic. That's the sort of challenge our members enjoy."

Jean Schumacher agrees, "Our Seed Exchange was a trendsetter for some plants in gardens—poppies, of course, and we had a big push on salvias until people realized the plants don't last long



Leftover seeds from the HPS/MAG Seed Exchange are shared with various nonprofit educational institutions. Above, Mollie Schaefer transplants seedlings at Devereux Industries Greenhouse.

enough here to mature to seed, so the Tender Perennials SIG became involved and took cuttings to Devereux [Industries Greenhouse, a horticulture program for special needs adults].”

Poppies!

The most oft-mentioned seed in discussing the HPS/MAG exchanges was *Papaver somnifera* ‘Lauren’s Grape,’ the opium poppy. Lorraine laughs, recalling a controversy about whether to list it by its common name. “The seed came to us from **Lauren Springer** through Charles Cresson. Over a number of years, this was enormously popular—people couldn’t get enough of it.”

The Enchanting Catalog— There’s Nothing Like It

As Lorraine Wallace tells it, “What sets this Seed Exchange apart from others is that we encourage contributors to describe their plant, why they grow it, and what they enjoy about having it in their garden.”

Jean Schumacher expressed delight at the descriptions, “People would say ‘Glorious!’, ‘Wonderful!’, ‘Everybody should have this!’, or warn, ‘the flower is ugly,’ or ‘you don’t want to cut this plant because it smells so awful.’”

Rob Broekhuis finds the descriptions revealing. “There’s such a wealth of experience behind the donors and it’s a small enough society that you get to know people just through their blurbs.”

“Plus,” Nancy Ondra added, “when there are multiple donors for a certain kind of seed, it’s interesting to see how the reported heights and bloom times varied in different areas.”

Lorraine Wallace explains, “If seven different people give the same type of seed, we don’t combine them—each is given a differentiating code.” Lorraine says that knowing whose garden seeds came from, “you can choose to order other seeds from that donor or find seed from a garden close to your growing zone.”

The massive volunteer effort to organize the Seed Exchange each year is also impressive. Rob Broekhuis compared it to other exchanges, “I also donate to NARGS (North American Rock Garden Society), but that is national, and they rotate it so that one local chapter takes on the full responsibility for only a year.” By contrast, with the HPS/MAG Seed Exchange, the same organization—and its exceptional team of volunteers—does all the work, year after year after year.



Phran Novelli is the descendent of grandparents with extremely green thumbs. A freelance writer, she’s been a home gardener for 20 years and completed the three-year horticultural program at the Arboretum School of the Barnes Foundation in Merion, PA. She is the host of KYW Newsradio’s Garden Report.

Ed Note: Become part of the HPS/MAG effort to keep outstanding plants in circulation by volunteering for one of this year’s Seed Exchange workshops listed below.