



Seedlink

*Preserving the Cultural and Genetic Diversity
of Southern Agriculture*

News from the Southern Seed Legacy

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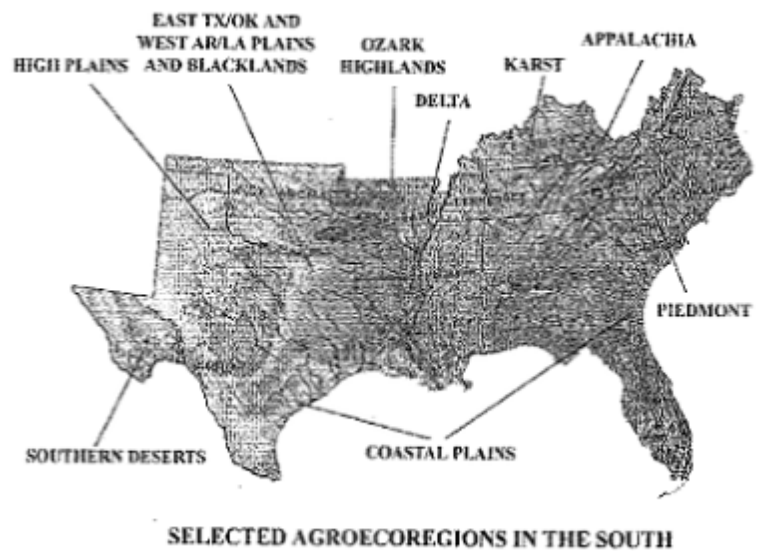
Fall 2010

Transitions

by Virginia Nazarea

The Southern Seed Legacy came into existence in 1996 as a Southern Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)-funded collaborative project based at the University of Georgia. Our aim in proposing it was to collect, conserve, and distribute landrace and heirloom seeds threatened by genetic erosion in order to enhance the diversity and resilience of Southern agriculture. Our approach was unique in two ways. We used an agroecoregion approach conceiving of the South as being broadly spread along the Appalachian, piedmont, and coastal regions, each with its characteristic biophysical and sociocultural contours overlaying a shared foundation. Perhaps more importantly, we regarded agrobiodiversity as located in cultural memory and paid equal attention to seeds and stories. We used the memory banking approach to document farmers' and gardeners' knowledge along with their seeds to make sure that biodiversity is not decontextualized or divested of emotional meaning and cultural significance.

Envisioning our role as catalyzer, not clearinghouse, we devoted our effort to transmitting heirloom seeds and the



memories and knowledge associated with them. Through PASS, or Pass Along Southern Seeds, we distributed packets of seeds from the SSL collection to interested participants on condition that they tell us about the agronomic and culinary performance of the crops and, at harvest time, return 1/3 of the seeds to us so we can replenish the collection and pass along 1/3 to another interested farmer or gardener. Young memory bankers went back home or explored new terrain over the summer, doing memory banking and collecting seeds in collaboration with relatives and informants.

After the official funding ended in 1998, SSL became a project that was propelled mainly by membership support and dedicated work by our Anthropology undergraduate and graduate students. Seeds and stories continued to be archived and passed along out of the Ethnoecology/Biodiversity Laboratory in Baldwin Hall. Not quite a gene bank, we struggled with maintaining and multiplying the seeds, our valiant operation extending from a chugging refrigerator and a rickety table in the lab to an old trailer and a weed-challenged plot at the farm.

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13th Annual Seed Swap

by Cara Sipprelle

As another April came round this year- a time usually reserved for growing excitement and anticipation of beautiful spring weather and our Annual Old Timey Seed Swap, we here at the Southern Seed Legacy were weighted with heavy hearts. Dr. Bob Rhoades- our founder, mentor, and friend- had passed away only weeks before after a long struggle with pancreatic cancer.

Despite weeks of sunny weather on either side of this year's appointed Saturday, we found our festival day soaked with a good old Southern thunderstorm and threats of nearby tornadoes. Yet somehow I was not surprised as I hunkered under our makeshift rainproof seed display to see the crowds begin to rumble down the muddy driveway with seeds, plants, and big smiles in tow. As always, our faithful swappers were there to resourcefully make the best out of any opportunity! We were able to acquire nearly 20 new varieties as well as provide seeds for lots of eager gardeners. We were also able to serve up a handsome dinner thanks to the valiant efforts of our famous BBQ smokers who fought off the gusts of rain from the early morning hours. The night concluded with an intimate memorial around the bonfire where Virginia accepted the Seed Saver of the Year Award for Bob, and several people spoke about all he had done for the Southern Seed Legacy and how he had been an inspiration in all our lives.

Although I had been disappointed as I watched the weather forecast for the days before the Swap, a friend wisely reminded me that seeds need water to grow, and that rain is cleansing and an opportunity to nurture new growth- in this

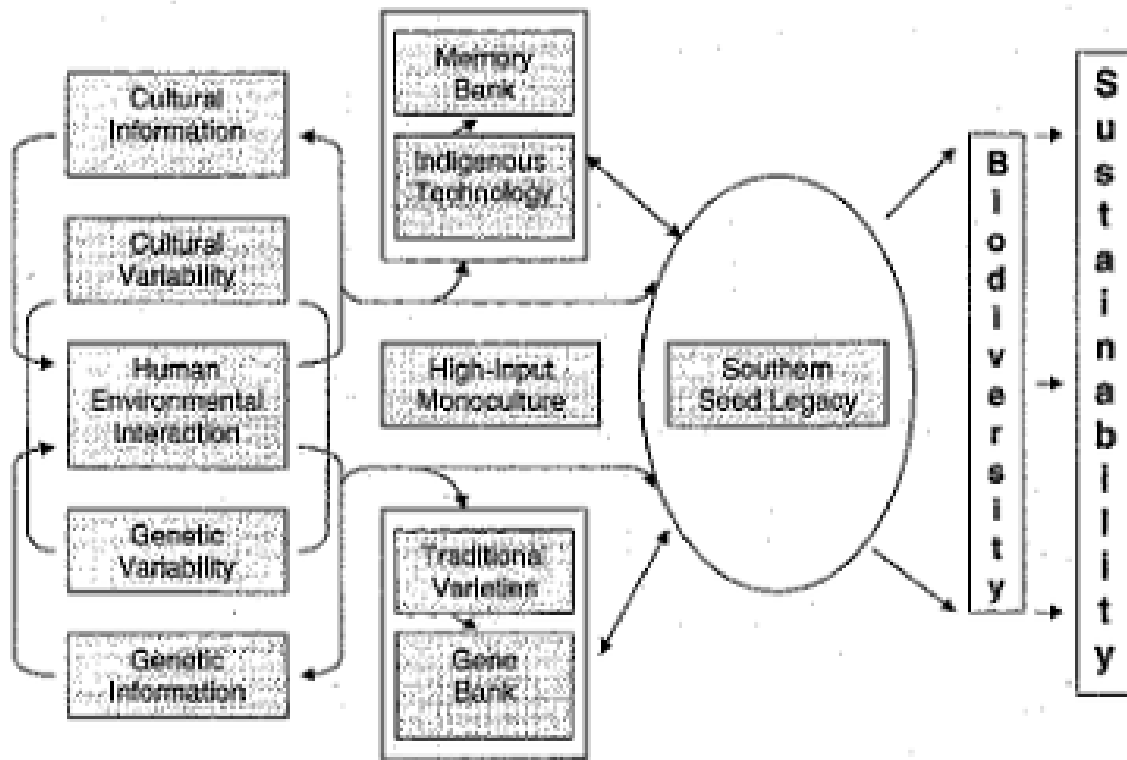
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Jim Veteto mans the BBQ for another year with the help of several volunteers. It was a struggle to keep the meat cooking with the wet weather, but as usual he pulled off a great dinner!



Folks gather round the fire to remember our founder, Dr. Bob Rhoades



The conceptual framework of the Southern Seed Legacy

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My husband and co-founder, Dr. Robert Rhoades, gave immeasurable investment of time and funds along with the use of Agrarian Connections for annual grow-outs and seed swaps. His vision was grand but grounded, with old-timey seeds and log cabins and piney wood cattle connecting people to places through “rivers of time” so that the present becomes full of possibilities and the future not so daunting. His vitality would have continued in inspiring and shaping the conservation of local agricultural legacies in the American south had not pancreatic cancer claimed his life on March 24, 2010. Last April, we held the 13th Annual Seed Swap and gave Bob the Seedsaver of the Year Award in

recognition of his significant contribution. His spirit will remain a sustaining force as SSL takes on a new direction.

In the Spring Semester 2011, Southern Seed Legacy will head to its new home in Denton, Texas, with Dr. James Veteto at its helm. The seeds will be packed and transported in January and preparations are underway to move the website and the membership to UNT. As a long-haired, long-limbed undergraduate student at UGA, Jim was one of our first PASS participants. He distinguished himself even then by sending us his carefully documented notes on the

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A small fraction of our seed collection, ready for display

The Southern Seed Legacy's New Home at the University of North Texas

by Jim Veteto

I know many of you through my years of involvement in the Southern Seed Legacy project (SSL) at the University of Georgia, where my interest in heirloom seed saving, agrobiodiversity research, and conservation efforts was nurtured under the tutelage of Dr. Robert Rhoades and Dr. Virginia Nazarea. I have been with the SSL from the beginning, as an undergraduate farmer-student, as coordinator for three years, and throughout many memorable seed swaps out at Agrarian Connections farm in Oglethorpe County, GA, where I swapped seeds and was known to smoke a plate of barbecue or two. It is one of the highest honors of my life to have recently taken the helm as the Director of the SSL and am extremely honored that Dr. Nazarea saw fit to appoint me to the position. I can only hope that I can add as much spirit and energy to the SSL as my dearly missed mentor and friend, Dr. Bob Rhoades, did in his exemplary 14 years of directing the project alongside Dr. Nazarea. This spring I finished my dissertation writing at The University of Georgia and in the summer packed up the family to head west to Denton, where I accepted a job as assistant professor of anthropology at the University of North Texas (UNT). Though perhaps on the western edge of the Southern region, make no mistake about it, Denton is still a firmly Southern town, with all the positive and negative things such a distinction brings with it! I have felt right at home with the friendly banter, good manners, and thoroughly smoked barbecue. What has been most satisfying,

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*Southern Seed Legacy's former coordinator and new director:
Dr. Jim Veteto*

Stories from Jim!

by Jim Veteto

I have been a seed saver since 1996 when I became aware of the importance of seedsaving through the Southern Seed Legacy founded by Drs. Robert Rhoades and Virginia Nazarea. It was then that I began to grow out old-timey vegetable varieties and pass them around the South, with as many of the cultural histories attached to them as I could gather. In 1999, I moved up to Western North Carolina and ran heirloom vegetable gardens. In 2003, I enrolled in Appalachian Studies and Sustainable Development at Appalachian State University and wrote my master's thesis on, "The History and Survival of Crop Biodiversity and Strategies for Conservation in the Southern Appalachian Mountains of Western North Carolina." In 2005, I came back to UGA to pursue a doctoral degree in Anthropology. In my dissertation, "Seeds of Persistence: Agrobiodiversity, Culture, and Conservation in the American Mountain South", I compiled biodiversity inventories for the Appalachian and Ozark mountains, establishing that the Appalachian region has the highest agrobiodiversity level in North America. My research also indicates that heirloom varieties in the Mountain South are still

being grown for cultural reasons, such as their continued usage in regional culinary traditions and their importance to family history and cultural memory.

I have encountered many interesting characters in my seed saving adventures and have run across a slew of good stories. An oft-repeated Appalachian tale gives credit to hunters for finding the undigested seeds when they were cleaning the innards of animals, and planting these out in their gardens. The famous Turkey Crow and Goose beans are such varieties, but I have also collected a Squirrel Bean and a Wild Goose Corn in western North Carolina that carry variants of the hunter origin tale. The Eastern Band of Cherokee deserve credit as the originators of much of the indigenous heirloom variety diversity in southern Appalachia. This is particularly true when speaking of bean, mountain butterbean, and squash varieties. While conducting research in collaboration with the Center for Cherokee Plants, I have been impressed with the diversity of Cherokee tender October beans and Cherokee Butterbeans. Roy Lambert, one of the expert seed savers of the tribe, has collected over 50 different bean varieties from the Cherokee

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performance of the heirloom seeds we had given him and returning a third of the seeds from his harvest. He served as Coordinator of SSL from 2005 to 2008 and did his doctoral research on the puzzle of persistence of heirloom seeds in the mountain regions of the South. Like Bob, Jim has invested both personally and academically on the conservation of Southern agriculture. We will keep everyone informed and we will stay connected through this transition and beyond. On behalf of Bob, I urge SSL members to keep the spirit alive. Just as seeds are renewed with every cycle of growth, the infusion of new leadership and travel to a new place will no doubt re-invigorate our beloved project. Bob, in his elegant and somewhat dramatic manner, would have pronounced that with firm links to the past, the Southern Seed Legacy is now poised to take on the future. Personally, I view this with trepidation and joy; our child ---swaddled in dreams and hopes, not to mention steeped in vulnerabilities and eccentricities---is going off to college. And there is no telling what adventures we are in for. ■



The Southern Seed Legacy Garden at Agrarian Connections Farm

"Stories" continued from page 4

Indian Fair Agricultural Exhibit over the years. They come in an amazing array of sizes, colors, and shapes. Many Cherokee bean varieties are used to make the famous Appalachian dried and strung beans called leather britches, using an old preservation technology that more than likely originated with the Cherokee.

Fred Lunsford, an Eastern Cherokee elder and Baptist preacher, told me a story about leather britches that he and his wife had preserved and prepared from a Yellow Hull Cornfield bean that he had originally acquired from his grandfather in Clay County, North Carolina. In 1995, Fred had a heart attack and was asked by a dietician at the hospital to record the foods he was eating at home. Day after day, leather britches were prominently on the list. The dietician from the North couldn't figure out why in the world Fred would be eating his leather britches. Well, she tried to investigate by asking the nurses, but Fred was onto her confusion and told them not to tell her what leather britches were. Finally the dietician asked the cook if she knew and she replied, "Boy, I reckon I do. I'd like to have me some right now." Sometime later, they asked Fred to bring leather britches to a potluck. His wife, Gladys, soaked them overnight in water, washed them in the morning, and cooked them slow with a ham hock. At the potluck they didn't last long, because the Appalachian people who were there knew that properly prepared leather britches have a taste like no other.

There are many varieties around the region that I have documented that are particular to certain families or are adapted to particular microclimates. Jack Banner, a gardener from Watauga County, North Carolina who was 90 years old when I interviewed him in 2005, had been maintaining a curious variety of potato called New York Pride that has been grown in his family since at least 1892. It is a small, oblong, white potato with a unique taste but is not very productive. Because it didn't produce well, none of the Banners' neighbors grew it, but the family liked its unique taste and continued to maintain it. When Mr. Banner tried to grow the potato at lower elevations near Marion, North Carolina when he moved there to take a job in a hospital, he found that it would not grow well there. So it is very likely that he has been maintaining a one-of-a-kind heirloom potato variety that is finely-tuned to the higher elevations of western North Carolina. ■



The many homes of Southern Seed Legacy: the lab at UGA (above) and the trailer at the farm (below)

“Seed Swap” continued from page 2

sense certainly appropriate weather for the Southern Seed Legacy at this significant moment and turning point. Although certainly a hard day for many of us, I will remember the day as marked with persistence- as people traveled from as far as Tennessee and South Carolina to swap seeds; with generosity- as volunteers trekked out to Crawford in rubber boots and rain coats to keep their appointed shifts; with creativity- as swappers, vendors, and world class BBQ smokers erected a plethora of makeshift rain shelters; and with courage- as those of us who were sad came together to put on our festival right on schedule like Dr. Rhoades would have wanted. Thank you to everyone who came out despite the weather. Your presence was a testament to the strength of the legacy left by Dr. Rhoades. And I'm sure he got a kick out of watching us all muck around in the rain. ■



Soggy (but happy) seedsavers! L-R: Charlotte Blume, co-founder Virginia Nazarea, and Chris Joseph

Seed Saver of the Year: Dr. Bob Rhoades

This year all of us involved with Southern Seed Legacy knew there was just one person to give the Seed Saver of the Year Award to, and that was Dr. Rhoades. In addition to the obvious fact that he, along with his wife Virginia, founded the Southern Seed Legacy (and therefore directly contributed to saving over 800 varieties of seeds in our organization alone), everyone agreed that his contribution was even greater than that. After we presented the award to Virginia, several people took the opportunity to speak about how Bob had enriched their lives, and all mentioned the special charisma that was the essence of Bob. That *je ne sais quoi* that both made him such a memorable axe swingin', hat wearin', pineywood wranglin' character and that inspired others to reach for the same lofty ideals that drove him to accomplish great things in his life. We certainly couldn't think of a more deserving recipient, and only wished he could have been there in person to accept the award.



SSL through the Years

compiled by Virginia Nazarea and Cara Sipprelle

This time of transitions has been an occasion for us to look not only forward but back as well, remembering how the Southern Seed Legacy has changed and grown over the years. In perusing through our archives preparing for the big move, we came across many of our old newsletters and thought it would be fun to recount the title and introductory paragraph of the different issues throughout the years. This walk down memory lane gave us glimpses of past projects, seed swaps, and characters that together have woven the Southern Seed Legacy into the fine, strong fabric that it is today. We hope you enjoy this peek into the past!

Fall 1996

Southern Seed Legacy Project receives SARE/ACE Grant
“Wanted old-fashioned running okra seed.” “Wanted old timey muskmelon banana seed.” “Wanted old timey colored bush butterbeans.” “Wanted old timey Red ripper pea seed or any old timey pea seed.” These are all recent advertisements in the Georgia Farmers and Consumers Market Bulletin. Many of the folks that place these ads are looking for old timey seeds they lost due to crop devastation by critters or weather and they want to replenish their seed stock for next year's planting. Other seekers remember certain varieties from their youth and they yearn for their taste again. Certainly, these informal exchange networks of Market Bulletins make it possible for some people to continue to locate and grow the heirloom plant varieties from their past; unfortunately, many times these advertisements go unanswered because no one is growing the variety any longer

Spring 1997

Southern Seeds and Sacred Groves, by Robert Rhoades
Several years ago when I was working for *National Geographic*
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magazine on an article about the world food supply and genetic resources, I travelled all of the world in search of interesting people who sought, saved, and savored seeds. I met adventurous plant explorers, serious scientists, dedicated extension agents, powerful politicians, and earnest lay seed savers. My life was full of international travel and exotic stops. Only after coming home to the American South did I begin to remember that I need not travel so far to learn about interesting people and their sacred seeds.

Winter 1998

Memories in the South- An Interview, by Lan Jia

I interviewed two generations of farmers for the southern memories project: Fannie Bryan and Marion Hunt are in their seventies, while John and Nathan are much younger (around 40). The elderly have rich life experiences and are more impressed by the changes in planting through the years. The younger generation looks upon farming as their personal research and lifetime career. However, they have one thing in common: they value gardening as a source of enjoyment in their lives and they are making an effort to preserve the old ways.

Winter 2000

News from the Southern Seed Legacy Network

The Southern Seed Legacy originated in response to the notable absence of the American South in the nation-wide grassroots effort to save heirloom or landrace seeds. During the research phase, the project uncovered active and viable seed saving networks (both of individuals and organizations) throughout most areas of the South. This was especially true of southern varieties of vegetable, fruit, ornamental, and other useful domesticated plants. The SSL seed bank holds approximately 300 seed sample accessions of nearly as many different named varieties collected in our field research or donated by SSL members. Moreover, we are discovering through our memory banking research that many of these heirloom seeds and plants serve as artifacts of larger cultural expressions (cuisine, folklore, community values, social customs), that they serve as connections to ancestry, identity, and what it means to be Southern in a globalizing world.

Fall 2001

Old Timey Seed Swap 2001, by Katie O'Connell and Crystal Leaver

After days of rain that had left the ground soggy, the clouds parted for a brief moment on June 2, 2001 to allow the Southern Seed Legacy Old Timey Seed Swap to proceed without a need for shelter. Besides the over 75 seed savers that attended, entertainers, booths, and food abounded at the outdoor event. Charlotte Blume let us taste her herbal homemade jellies and Natasha Sandoval sold crafts. Scott Jones amazed us with his demonstration of primitive skills. The bluegrass band, the Real Nice Time, jammed while the crowd enjoyed good ole' Southern barbeque cooked by Glen Augustine and Albert Jackson. Between musical sets, the crowd was amused by the Botanical Garden's puppet show about composing and pollination.

Summer 2006

New Southern Heritage Orchard Project Initiated by SSL by Susannah Chapman

This spring Agrarian Connections and the Southern Seed Legacy added a new component to their work with Southern heirloom cultivars with the creation of the Southern Heritage Orchard Project. Because fruit and nut trees are an integral part of Southern agricultural heritage, the project will focus on in situ preservation of apples, pears, figs, peaches, plums, muscadines, blueberries, pecans, walnuts and more. With the move to commercial agriculture, the displacement of rural families to urban centers and the decrease in the importance of subsistence agriculture, many of the old-timey varieties have almost disappeared from the Southern landscape, and numerous varieties have already gone extinct. Thus it is imperative to actively preserve the germplasm and associated cultural knowledge of these Southern heirloom cultivars. We initiated the project by researching, collecting, and planting a one-hundred tree orchard of old-timey Southern apples at the Agrarian Connections Farm. We began our research with apples because of the very special role they play within the history of the South.

Spring 2008

The 10th Old Timey Seed Swap: One of Our Biggest Ever!, by Jim Veteto

On April 28, 2007, about 125 people came out to the meadow on Agrarian Connections Farm near Crawford, Georgia to participate in the 10th Annual Southern Seed Legacy Old Timey seed Swap. Seed Savers from Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee set up tables to display and swap seeds and many interested newcomers came out just to find out more about the SSL. Prominent southern seed savers John Coykendall, Rodger Winn, and Mike Watkins from the South Carolina Foundation Seed Association combined with SSL and numerous individuals to provide access and barter to hundreds of hard-to-find southern heirloom vegetable and flower varieties

Winter 2010

The Life and Legacy of Epic Heirloom Tomato Grower Elbert "Bert" Searcy, by Cara Sipprelle

This year the Southern Seed Legacy was honored to inherit the heirloom tomato seed collection of Mr. Elbert B. Searcy of Harrods Creek, Kentucky, affectionately known by friends as “Dirty Bert,” “The Tomato Man,” or “Spider.” Bert, who passed away peacefully at his home in June of 2008, has been an avid gardener and seed saver for his entire life with a special passion for tomatoes. His good friends Heather Cornish, Gary Millwood, Mark McKinney, and Scott Buckingham were kind enough to gather up the seeds from over 165 different varieties, tend to Bert's garden after he passed, and facilitate the generous donation. ■

“New home” continued from page 4

however, is perhaps the manner in which the University has welcomed the SSL with open arms. In a space-starved campus, we were given a nice lab to house a brand new seed storage refrigerator and workspace for student helpers. It has been tough for me to find time as I settle in to speak to all the individuals—deans, students, public relations officials, colleagues, etc.—who want to sit down with me and learn more about the SSL. So rest assured, the SSL has found a new home where it is welcomed, valued, encouraged, and deeply appreciated. Already there are many plans underway to keep up the solid work that the SSL has been doing over the years and to expand it into exciting new directions. Let me highlight just a few here. Although always a part of the SSL vision, perhaps efforts in recent years to connect seedsavers throughout the southeast with each other have not been as focused as they could be. With this aim in mind—facilitating seed swapping between members—the SSL is focusing energy on creating a new annual catalogue that will list seed savers, all the seeds they have available to send out to fellow members, and a practical method for doing so (modeled on the members catalogue that has been successful for so many years at The Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, IA). Erin Wackerla, a masters student at UNT, has decided to focus her master’s practicum on researching and implementing the best way possible to make this happen. Seed growouts, always a pressing issue with academic responsibilities competing for time, will also be a focus for the SSL at UNT. We have already been in contact with AmeriCorps, several local churches, and the university Slow Food group, all of whom are eager to help partner with us in growing out—thus perpetuating—the 700 plus varieties that constitute the SSL. In addition, we will continue to focus on cultural memory banking, interviewing as many Southern seed savers as possible, and documenting their important local knowledge for the generations to come. For the southeastern US, promoting our seed legacy has become an even more important mission in the past several years. Working with the Renewing America’s Food Traditions (RAFT) program, we have been able to show that the southeastern US houses more heirloom varieties than any other

region in America, Canada, and northern Mexico. In collaboration with RAFT this spring, we will be helping to publish a public document on the endangered food traditions of southern Appalachia, which will be followed by similar publications from other Southern regions. As our country continues to modernize—yet within the throes of a deep recession—we do not know what the future may bring, so it is particularly important to document, preserve, and promote the rich and diverse heirloom seed legacy of our region.

The most important responsibility that has driven us from the beginning, and remains our top priority, is to continue to figure out how we can be of service to you—our members. With that in mind, we will be contacting you—soon after our physical transfer to UNT—with an inquiry about how we can improve the SSL to better meet your needs and better facilitate seed swapping and saving throughout the South. In addition, we will be re-vamping the SSL website with new features and user-friendly components. Like all organizations, we are only as good as our members and how we are able to serve them.

Finally, I would again like to thank Bob Rhoades and Virginia Nazarea, faithful founders and stewards of the SSL throughout the first 14 years of its existence. Without their vision and guidance, none of what we have accomplished would have been possible. We will continue to draw on Dr. Rhoades’ wisdom—even as he is no longer with us—through his writings, the strong organization that he has passed on, and his spirit that lives on within our work. We will maintain continual communication with Dr. Nazarea, who is one of the foremost thinkers on heirloom seed saving strategies worldwide, and are confident and hopeful that she will continue to help guide our thinking, practice, and mission. We are extremely fortunate to have such elders before us to help guide our path forward.

Sincerely,
Jim Veteto, Ph.D.
Director, Southern Seed Seed Legacy