

UNPACKING INDIGENOUS SEED POLITICS: RESPECT OVER ROYALTIES

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Seeds are the essence of how fruits and vegetables make it to our plates. But seeds are much more complicated; behind seeds are people and all the political, social and cultural issues we bring. Each year, the United States brings in billions of dollars off large yields of crops, with a 2023 total of \$267 billion. When you dig into the history and how growers, farmers and consumers are treated, it's clear that there hasn't been a time when agriculture hasn't impacted someone's rights and autonomy. The focus, in this case, is on food sovereignty. Indigenous communities in the U.S. have long faced issues over food systems due to land disputes. These issues of ownership and respect extend to how vendors and other growers use seeds and agricultural practices connected with Indigenous communities for profit, often without consent or fair compensation. And too many people have been prevented from growing and owning their own food, including seeds.



Ensuring food sovereignty in the U.S. means recognizing and supporting the rights of these populations to control their own seeds, land and agricultural traditions. So who gets to profit from seeds? How do we honor the seedkeepers who have nurtured food on this land for countless generations? That's a question that lives in a gray area, and not all Indigenous communities agree on the outcome. However, what is clear is that growers and seed sellers should respect Indigenous seeds every step of the way.

For example, in Washington state, the Makah Ozette potato has become a prized culinary specimen of flavor and versatility. Its namesake is the Makah Tribe, historically based in the Seattle region and longtime consumers of this particular potato. The Makah Ozette potato's origins, according to Chef Fernando Divina, is disputed by the scientific community, and he explained that Nancy Turner of the University of British Columbia and other scientists traced the origin from Peru by Spaniards and hence propagated by the associated tribes — Makah, Haida, Bella Coola (perhaps) and Tlingit.

Fernando was part of a team that included Slow Food Seattle years ago who, inspired by the global Ark of Taste program, set out to raise awareness of the potato and improve its ability to be cultivated. For many years, the chapter sold Makah Ozette seeds to bring this prized potato to garden plots across the region; soon, for-profit seed sellers followed suit and increased stock of the potato and its popularity. When speaking with Kim Marshall, Slow Food USA regional councilor for Washington State, she saw just how well the potato flourished. "Having served on the Slow Food Seattle board, I've witnessed firsthand the volume of emails the chapter receives. Many of these inquiries are from people seeking more information, such as where to get seed potatoes and how to grow them. It's been popular for many years," Kim said.

The potato takes about two years of intensive labor to grow, and while the Slow Food Seattle chapter decided to provide "royalties" to the Makah Nation, Kim explained, "The goal was never to make profit. It was always to make the potato accessible to the community." By spring 2023, Slow Food Seattle offered the Makah Nation the proceeds of their seed sales.



This fundraiser inadvertently sparked a larger question: What do Indigenous voices think about "royalties," and what do vendors do with seeds, such as the Makah Ozette potato? Ultimately, Kim and the Slow Food Seattle team decided to pause their sales of the Makah Ozette because of the uncertainty they felt in the ethical considerations of their yearslong project.

When asked about "Indigenous seed royalties," Lorraine Gray, a member of the Mohawk Kahnawake community of Quebec and co-founder and executive director of the Four Bridges Traveling Permaculture Institute, said, "To tell you the truth, this is the first time that I've even heard this term used." She continued, "Royalties sound very colonial and not something that I believe any Indigenous person would embrace."

There's no right answer to what we should call the money raised and given to Indigenous communities. What is clear is that money isn't important; rather, it's something entirely different. "It's about tradition; it's about respect. Because not everybody who takes a seed treats it with the respect that it deserves. It's the beginning of life. It's like somebody's embryo," Lorraine said. Aaron Lowden, Indigenous Seed Keepers Network Program Coordinator and member of the Acoma Pueblo nation, shared similar sentiments: "Most Indigenous seed keepers do not want to commodify their seed."

These statements made by Lorraine and Aaron don't mean vendors, growers and others interested in Indigenous seeds should forgo providing proceeds. It's complicated, but if non-Indigenous people profit from seeds and make it about money, "then it's about the money. Because why should somebody be getting rich off of something that is the tradition of any Indigenous community?" Lorraine said.

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The question of who should profit from seeds and traditions connected to the Indigenous community is great. While Indigenous communities don't commodify seeds, others do, and the choice to donate proceeds is solely on the seller. When asked the question of when a vendor should give proceeds to Indigenous communities, Lorraine said it depends on how vendors got these seeds. "Was it gifted to them? Did they steal it, borrow it or take it without the knowledge of the community where they come from? That makes a difference." She continued, "So if a company or a person is making money off of cultivating and selling those seeds, definitely a portion of it should go back to the community where it came from and in a way that supports activities in that community."

Considering no one can control what a grower or seller will do, perhaps the call to action is for respect and to let Indigenous communities lead. Fortunately, some vendors and growers are doing just that: for example, Slow Food USA.

Slow Food USA is one of many who work with Indigenous people, including Lorraine, who donated Koda Blue Corn seeds to school garden kits for the 2024 Plant a Seed campaign. "We had youth putting the seed into the envelopes, and then we shipped it all, enough for 400 school gardens," Lorraine said. From this partnership, proceeds from the Plant a Seed campaign have made their way to the Indigenous Seed Keepers Network for the last three years of the campaign.

When these proceeds are given to Indigenous communities, they are added to funds that allow community-based work to be done outside of the traditional model of capitalism. Through shared community celebrations and harvests, Indigenous communities can live outside of the U.S. currency paradigm.

Another way to help is through grassroots work. At the Indigenous Seed Keepers Network, "funds go to support folks on the ground who are doing good work. We're just uplifting, supporting, resourcing and connecting," Aaron said.

Some of this work takes the form of different regional networks across the Midwest, Southwest and Turtle Island as a whole. There are quarterly calls where people share knowledge and collaborate on meaningful work. The Indigenous Seed Keepers Network even provides a stipend to Indigenous farmers, food justice activists and gardeners to grow and become changemakers.

It must be said that even though proceeds from seeds such as Slow Food USA's Plant a Seed campaign help the Indigenous Seed Keepers Network, it is only a small part of the money received to make things happen. Unrestricted funds from different funding sources help too. This money supplements this work, but it is the strength of the community that informs the work and keeps it going.

Instead of selling seeds without respecting them, vendors and other growers alike who want to profit from Indigenous seeds should take a cue from Indigenous people like Lorraine who celebrate through ceremonies and "thank the creator and mother Earth for the food that has been given to us."

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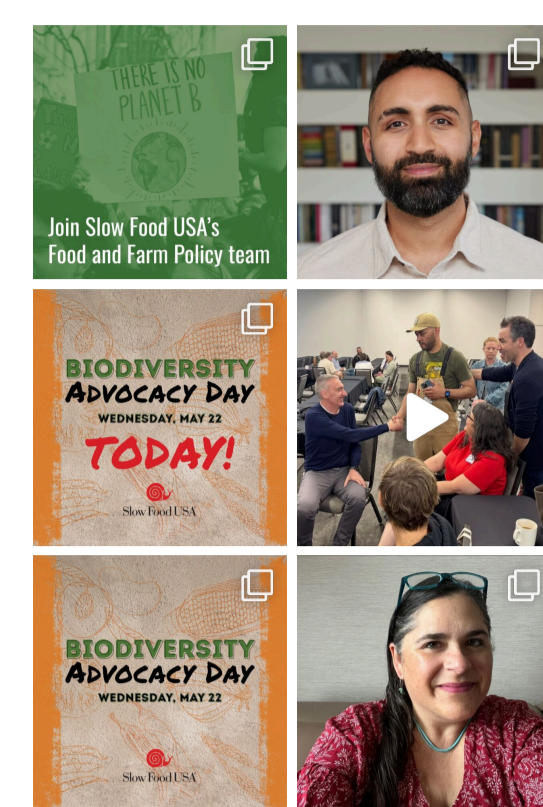
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