Food Freedom Fight

The State of the Ongoing Battle for Food Sovereignty

by KATHERINE BELL

Editor's Note: Look for Part 2 of this article in the April issue of Acres U.S.A.

In June 2011, Kristin Canty's documentary film *Farmageddon* premiered, alerting viewers to an economic war going on: the U.S. government against small-scale, local farming operations. Today this war continues. In fact, things have escalated. At the same time that the good food movement, alongside the health freedom movement and the food freedom fight is gaining ground among the buyers and eaters of food, our government on certain fronts continues to curtail things. Yet there is much that can be done by the farmers and their customers to ultimately win what seems like a David vs. Goliath situation.

On the food safety front, the core issue we are facing right now, according to Judith McGeary of the Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance, is the government uses the food safety banner again and again against small farms even though there have been significant successes allowing raw cow's milk and cottage foods sales. In 2015, the FDA moved to narrow the Tester-Hagan amendment, which was a win for small-scale, direct marketer farmers when it was added to the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2011. Under Tester-Hagan, local food growers could qualify for an exemption from certain FSMA regulations, and small farm businesses stayed under more favorable local and state oversight. Now with the narrowing of definitions, a local FDA regulator can revoke this exemption if he cites a risk of foodborne illness, and he gets the power of discernment of risk.

> "There is a revolving door that is part of hiring in government. Monsanto and other Big Ag executives end up in high government positions."

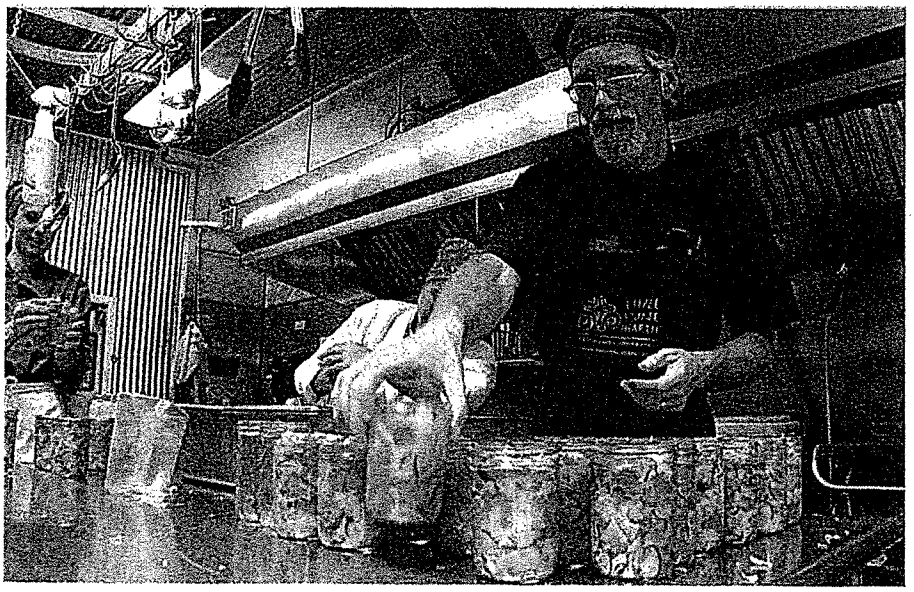
Following the 2013 acquittal on several counts for Wisconsin farmer Vernon Hershberger's right to sell raw milk products, government aggression against raw milk sales lessened. An international outcry brought favor to Hershberger, and sales of unpasteurized milk are "booming and growing exponentially" according to Cornucopia Institute's Mark Kastel. Cornucopia is a farm policy research institute based in Wisconsin. Still, hostility emanates from state-level regulators over food safety. The fight now includes access to raw camel's milk and milk from other animals.

Attorney Elizabeth Rich of the Farm-to-Consumer Legal Defense Fund reports that the FDA is including camel's milk under the sales ban stated in the interstate commerce prohibition though only cow's milk was intended.

"Many are passionate about access to camel's milk for the healing properties they find in it – particularly for autism in children," said Rich. Rich was chief legal counsel for Hershberger.

When it comes to food safety and truth in labeling for Big Food, the federal government's 2016 "Dark Act" protects Big Food and biotech players by exempting many GMO ingredients and letting QR codes and 800 numbers suffice in place of labels that would openly identify GMOs in food. The legislation supersedes state GMO labeling laws. On top of this, Kastel, head of Cornucopia's Organic Integrity Project, notes that corporations own almost all name-brand organics.

"There are two levels of the term organics," said Kastel. "There is a known level and a mystery level. Based on Cornucopia scorecards, we know gaming the system goes on. The USDA condones secrecy at every level. If the USDA does find a lawbreaker, it's kept a secret. Sweetheart deals happen with no penalty or public reporting of sanctions. Such secrecy is a big favor to industry. The



along very well grazing livestock on it. I will add though, the first three weeks that broomsedge begins putting up leaves, livestock will eat it and do fairly well. After that, forget it.

Now back to the autumn olive trees growing among the broomsedge; every tree I inspected was growing like gangbusters. The amazing part was that under every tree was a very dark lush stand of fescue, orchard grass and legumes. What was going on? If you looked outside the drip line of the tree, the area was 100 percent broomsedge. Those autumn olives had healed the soil under each tree where it was now supporting beneficial grasses. When we turned livestock onto this pasture, every tree drip line, the ground forage was neatly trimmed by the livestock; the other areas were untouched. If we take out the invasive autumn olive, then all natural soil-building is stopped dead in its tracks. Yet, we don't want our pastures to be choked with invasive species.

Our previous management practice was to cut them off at ground level and paint the stump with herbicide. This usually kills them, but not always. It costs money and labor, plus I hate everything about putting down chemicals on our farms. It is a tool that has a place in certain situations to get you out of trouble with a disgruntled landowner, but it still tugs at my heart to paint chemicals on a live stump.

After seeing firsthand the beneficial acts of soil-building, these guys are performing for us it really started to bother me that I was killing them. They perform an economical service for me, and I was killing them. Every time I painted a stump, I could imagine the screaming going on by the billions of soil microbe critters living on the root exudates of the tree.

Not only was I killing stumps, I was killing the soil, and it's never-ending – another new crop is always coming up. There had to be a profitable, environmentally friendly solution. We decided that we were going to make some money with these invasive species that love growing on our farms and heal the soil at the same time. We have animals that eat green leaves. The problem was the animals could not reach the upper limbs of these trees.

After educating our landowners to the benefits of using autumn olive to promote soil health, some of them were on board to let us experiment. We started coppicing trees (coppicing has been practiced since the Roman Empire days). We cut the tree off flush with the ground and don't paint the stump with any chemical treatment. This allows the tree stump to sprout back numerous sprouts with succulent green leaves that make excellent livestock and wildlife forage.

Ideally, it would be nice to rent a chipper and chip the limbs back onto the drip line of the tree. We are considering renting a chipper for that option, because it's carbon and we need more carbon on the land. Our first group of autumn olive that we coppiced grew back like an ornamental bush in three months, completely leafed out. The sheep went nuts gorging on the new juicy leaves, and goats enjoy them more than any other sprout that I know of.

Every time you coppice a tree, you get some root die back, which releases organic matter into the soil. The invasive species are still growing; we are just controlling how they grow. Does it take management and labor to do this? Yes, but so does killing them with herbicide. At least with this labor we are getting a good return in the form of succulent animal feed and building healthier soil from the tree root exudates. I now sleep better with a clear conscience knowing that I am not killing our farm microbes. Autumn olive has nitrogen-fixing root nodules, allowing it to thrive in problem soils and drought conditions.

These invasive species also add cover and habitat for our livestock, wildlife and birds species. The deer really go after the coppiced stump regrowth sprouts. The tip of every sprout is plucked off before we get a chance to graze it with domestic animals. We have one ridge that is surrounded by broomsedge with hundreds of autumn olive trees growing in it. We coppiced every tree and named the ridge "Coppiced Ridge." Guess where the biggest buck was harvested last deer season? We may rename

Modern Trade Routes

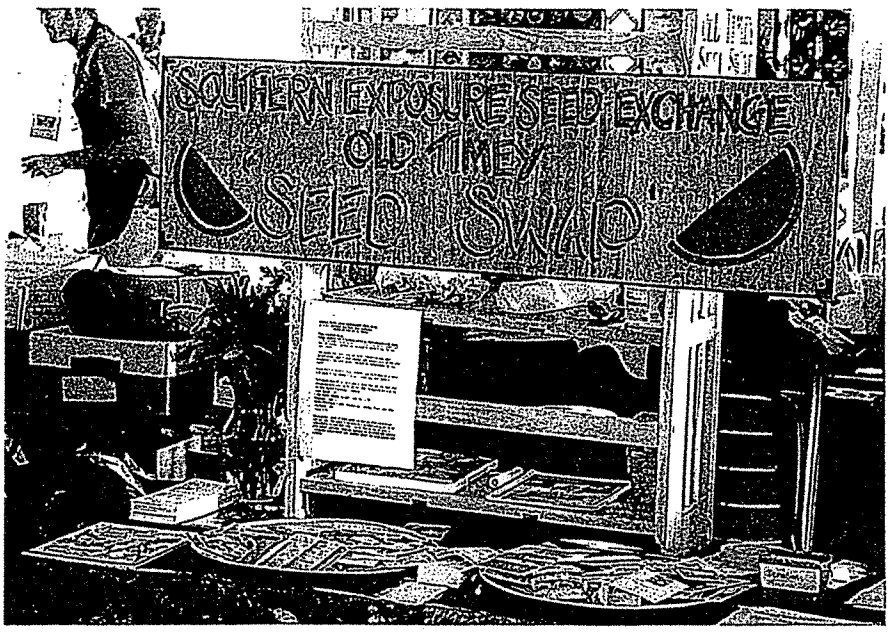
Saving seeds connects us to our history, culture, and each other.

By Bevin Cohen

As kids, we all learned in school about the ancient trade routes used to move spices, tea, and other commodities around the world. The most well-known was the Silk Road, of course, but it was the maritime spice routes that brought explorers around the globe and even played a role in Columbus' "discovery" of America. Now, you and I both know someone can't discover land that someone else already lives on, but that's another topic for a different article.

When learning about these trade routes, we also learned that they served a purpose beyond just trade between countries. These roads also facilitated cultural exchange: religions, ideas, and knowledge. But unfortunately, we also learned about these trade routes in the past tense.

As a seed keeper, I serve multiple roles, such as gardener, historian, educator, and storyteller, but through this work, I also often find myself on the road traveling extensively to share these precious heirlooms with my fellow seed savers, wherever they may be. We gather at seed swaps, farm conferences, libraries, coffee shops; basically anyplace that offers enough room for us to spread out our treasures on a blanket for display. In a way, we're quite similar to those ancient people who traveled across the land offering their herbs and spices, their teas and jewelry, to curious and interested onlookers. We, too, are eager to share our unique and valuable items that have sometimes traveled a great distance to be admired and appreciated by gardeners from a faraway land.



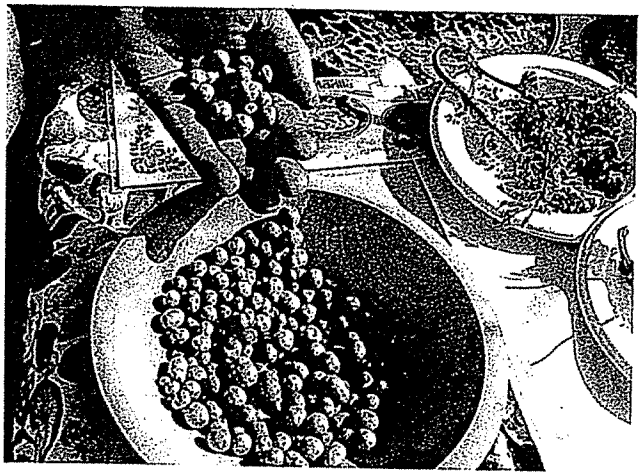
Get gardening tips and diversify your seed supply at your local seed swap.

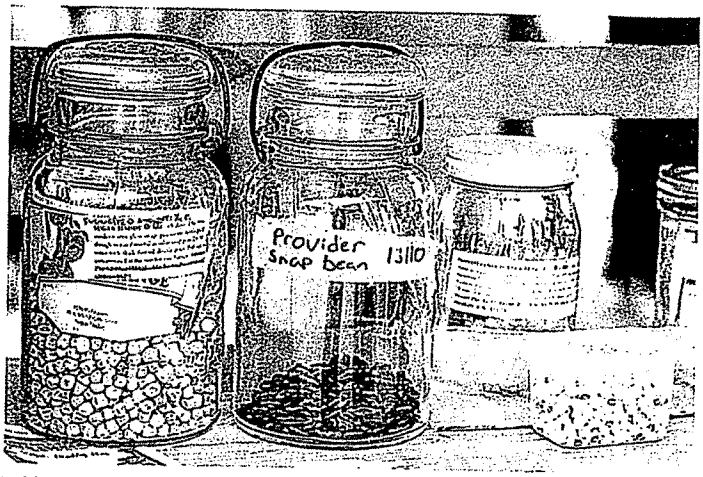
BEATE PHROSCH

A couple of years back, I acquired seeds of a beautiful bean from a friend named Debbie Groat, who lived not too far away from me in Michigan. These were beautiful seeds for a cultivar of pole bean known simply as 'Grape.' As the name implies, the bean is spherical, almost perfectly round, and a deep, dark-red color. These seeds were absolutely gorgeous, and Debbie was actually using them to make jewelry! When I first saw them, I knew that I just had to have them. How could I resist their siren song? Thankfully, Debbie is a generous friend, and she happily sent me home with a sample of these incredible beans.

I grew the beans that summer, and they did quite well for me. They were vigorous and healthy plants that grew vines 6 to 7 feet long, taller than the trellis I had built for them in our front garden. The pods themselves were rather flat, each containing 6 to 8 round little seeds that quickly filled out their shells. The brown and yellow mature pods were ready to harvest by the end of September, and I was blessed with a large harvest of round, nearly purple seeds. I'm always amazed at how prolific plants can be; from just a small handful of seeds came well over a pound of beans for me to enjoy and share with my friends.

The following spring, I was back on the road to visit friends and swap seeds at one of my favorite events, the Appalachian Seed Swap. I was excited to show off my recent harvest of 'Grape' beans, as I was sure that they'd be a stunner. They didn't disappoint. Everyone was in awe of these incredible seeds, and I soon started to wish that I would've brought more of them with me, because they were going fast! Everybody was eager to get a sample





Saving seeds expands our gardening knowledge and can help us to connect with Mother Nature and each other.

of the seeds, and I was more than happy to oblige until one older woman stopped at my table, eyed my beans with a most inquisitive stare, and then asked in an almost accusatory tone, "Where did you get these seeds?"

After a brief, and maybe nervous, hesitation, I told my visitor the story of my friend Debbie and the beautiful seed jewelry she was known for. I asked her to reach out her hand, and into it, I poured a small pile of these burgundy-colored pearls. I wasn't exactly sure what to expect in response, but I never would've guessed the incredible tale I was about to hear. As it turns out, the woman recognized this unique bean, and she remembered her grandmother growing it when she was young girl. 'Grape' is a fall bean, meaning the seeds are ready to be harvested and used as a dry bean late in the growing season. As she gazed reminiscently at the seeds in her hand, she stirred them around with her finger and recalled that her grandmother used to make the most delicious baked beans for Sunday dinner using the 'Grape' beans that grew in her home garden.

I asked what had happened with her grandmother's beans, and if her family grew them anymore. Her voice turned sad as she told me about how her parents had moved away when she was still a young girl, and she wasn't sure what had happened to the family seeds. Her folks had maintained a garden for a short time after they had settled into their new home, but when she and her brothers had grown up, they moved on and didn't keep a garden anymore. Unfortunately, this is a story I hear all too often when I'm trying to track down the history of a family heirloom variety. Too many times, the trail runs cold, and we can only follow the story back so far. I asked the lady where her family had moved when they left the Appalachian Mountains. "Up to Michigan, of course; we had to go where the jobs were," she said. "My daddy had gotten a job at the automobile plant."

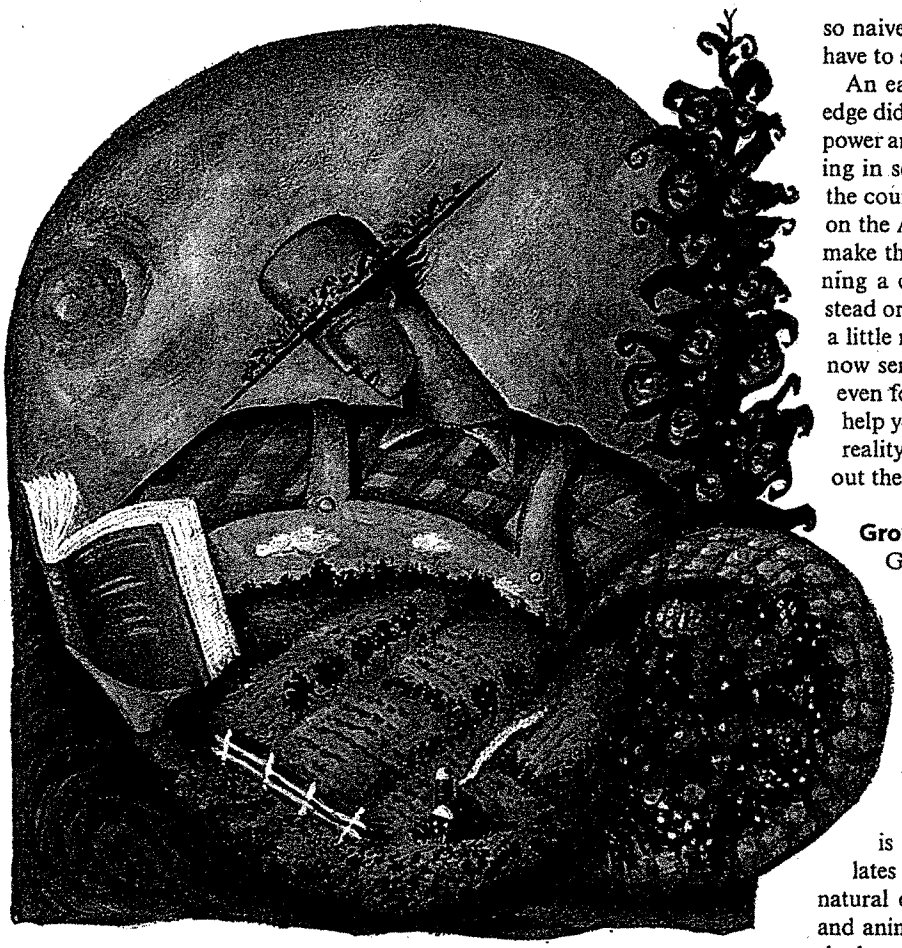
Was it possible that the beautiful red seed I had acquired from my friend in Michigan was the very same cultivar this woman's family had brought from Kentucky so many years before? And had that seed followed this modern trade route to find its way home here in the Appalachian Mountains? One of the lessons I've learned after years of working with seeds is that there's no such thing as coincidence. Just as the ancient trade routes linked people, countries, and cultures together, the modern trade routes of the seed keeper are continuing this tradition of connecting people, helping us build the bridges of commonality that are so desperately needed in today's world. Through seeds, we can share and express our love of the natural world. Through seeds, we see that we're all connected. These modern trade routes are the webs through which we're all entwined.

Bevin Cohen is a writer, poet, herbalist, gardener, seed saver, and wanderer. He lives and works at Small House Farm with his wife and two sons. He's also the founder of MI Seed Library, a community seed-sharing initiative that has worked closely with a number of communities to help establish seed library programs across Michigan and beyond.

Want to Start Saving Seeds?

Our "Seed Saving" course, part of the MOTHER EARTH NEWS FAIR ONLINE, is a great jumping-off point for establishing your own seed bank. Led by author Bevin Cohen, the workshops in this course cover the basics, including history, varieties, terminology, pollination, processing, storing, and more! For more information and to register, visit *Online.MotherEarthNewsFair.com*.

Further your seed-saving journey with Bevin's books, which you can find in our online store at *www.MotherEarthNews.com/Store*. *Saving Our Seeds* is a great how-to guide, leading the reader step-by-step through the process of saving their seeds from 43 different crops. *From Our Seeds & Their Keepers* is a collection of interesting and heartwarming stories about heirloom and heritage seeds, as well as the people who keep them.



JANET ATKINSON

Earth-Based Education

Heading back to the land? Try going back to school first

BY ANDI MCDANIEL

THE BACK-TO-THE-LANDERS of the 1960s tended to be heavy on idealism and light on practical know-how. Armed with little more than coveralls and a few dog-eared guidebooks of the age, they headed to the country with mixed results. Today's practical pioneers may be just as committed to good land stewardship, but they're not likely to be quite so naive. Lucky for them, they don't have to start from scratch.

An earlier era's hard-won knowledge didn't just fade away with flower power and bell-bottom jeans. It's waiting in schools and programs across the country where you can study up on the ABCs of rural life before you make the leap. Whether you're planning a complete off-the-grid farmstead or just hoping to make yourself a little more self-sufficient, there are now seminars, apprenticeships, and even four-year degree programs to help you make your earthy dream a reality. Here's just a taste of what's out there.

Growing (and Finding) Food

Going back to the land doesn't have to mean going hungry. For the pioneer born without a green thumb, there are programs designed to teach you about gardening, farming, and finding food that's waiting to be dug or plucked out of the wild.

Permaculture: Permaculture is a farming method that emulates the diversity and resilience of natural ecosystems. By raising crops and animals that provide the likes of shade and nutrients for each other, growers can reduce the need for the costly artificial inputs that sustain the mainstream farm. Offered across the country, permaculture programs run 10 to 14 days and involve equal parts classroom time and dirty work. Students learn how to balance factors like weather, waste, and water in designing gardens that will eventually maintain themselves. For a look at programs worldwide, look up the International Institute for Ecological Agriculture, (www.permaculture.com) or check out *Permaculture Activist* magazine: $23/yr. (4 issues) from Box

In a few years, these questions will creep into the mainstream. Only a small chunk of the population will ever go into a brooding medieval fantasy such as EverQuest, but friendlier virtual worlds have emerged. Indeed, they're not even games: They have no goals, no "levels" to achieve, no points to score.

There.com, for example, is a 3-D world devoted to nothing but chatting and socializing, using avatars that look like seductive, attractive models. You'd probably prefer it to real life, because everything is just so much prettier in There. As in the real world, one of the main activities in There is shopping. The company created a currency, Therebucks, and tied it directly to the value of the American dollar to prevent inflation. Players spend a lot of time customizing their appearance (often for the purposes of flirting), so Nike and Levi's have virtual clothes that they sell solely inside the game. Individual players, too, have become designers, creating outfits they sell to other There citizens. "One of the leading clothes designers is making $3,000 to $4,000 a month, which is a full-time job," says There's founder, Will Harvey. The U.S. military has even licensed a private chunk of There and created a simulation of the planet on it. The army is currently using the virtual Baghdad in There as a training space for American soldiers.

Though he has made his career out of studying these economies, Castronova is dismayed by how the real world has bled into the virtual one. "I liked it better when they were just, you know, games," he says wistfully. He preferred the meritocratic feel of EverQuest, before all the duping and the auctions and the bidding wars for powerful avatars. He liked the idea of online worlds as a place you migrated to when, like an immigrant, you wanted a new lease on life—just as three years ago, depressed and lonely, he first stumbled into EverQuest.

His own voyage had a good ending. Earlier this year, the communications department at Indiana University in Bloomington called. They had read his work and wanted to talk. Weeks later, they offered—and he accepted—a fully tenured position as an associate professor of telecommunications. Castronova had still never published a single one of his EverQuest papers in print; all his analyses had been distributed online. Like an avatar in the game, he had leveled up.

➤ *Clive Thompson (Featurewell.com) writes about science and technology for* The New York Times Magazine, Wired, *and* Details, *and runs the tech-culture blog collisiondetection.net. Excerpted from the new Canadian general-interest magazine* The Walrus *(June 2004). Subscriptions: $29.75/12 issues from Box 26405 STN B, Toronto, ON M7Y 4R1; www.walrusmagazine.com.*