



# Restoring Nature's Diversity

By Ann Katzenbach

Late last winter Lynda Prim arrived in Patagonia to take over management of the Native Seeds/SEARCH (NS/S) conservation farm. An anthropologist, educator, farm advisor, and advocate in sustainable organic agriculture for over 30 years, she found a daunting situation. The man who ran and maintained the farm equipment had quit, and nearly every machine was in need of repair. Then the well pump broke down and had to be replaced. Here she was with a new job in an unfamiliar place, and her closest support system was in Tucson.

Now, as harvest time approaches, everything is working, including a dedicated staff, the machines, and the innumerable small insects that carry pollen around. Whew! Good for Lynda and the farm—and for Patagonia, as we benefit in many ways from having the farm here.

Native Seeds/SEARCH was started in 1983 to help the Tohono O'odham, who, when they were given broccoli and radish seeds by local nonprofit groups, asked if there were seeds for plants like those that their ancestors had grown. Two people listened and understood. Gary Nabhan and Mahina Drees began searching for the ancestral seeds of southwestern Native Americans, and whenever they found any, they planted some and then saved the seeds from the

new plants. Essentially, that's what NS/S has been doing ever since, but in 20 years, the Tohono O'odham Nation has multiplied just as the seeds have, and today Native Americans throughout the southwest are saving seeds and growing ancient crops. They are also studying, along with NS/S, how to adapt old organic farming practices that used less water and were kinder to the soil. This work with Native Americans is at the heart of today's NS/S, but the crops and farming practices that work for their Native American clients have implications for all small farmers.

The farmland in the valley just north of town was purchased by the Nature Conservancy and NS/S in 1997. The Conservancy took 100 acres of land along Sonoita Creek, and NS/S began its farm on 60 acres of old flood plain. The land had previously grown alfalfa. Sixty acres is a lot of land when you look across the fenced area where the conservation farm is located. It's hard to see all the things that are planted there, but right now the sunflowers stand out as they tower over the corn and beans planted next to them, acting as a wind break. It makes an appealing environment for pollinators (which Lynda said are more numerous and varied than anywhere she has ever been), not to mention providing shade for other plants.

Then there are the mysterious, big, boxy structures covered with honey-colored netting. This is where special plants grow, safe from pests and pollinators. There's a row of rare red run-

ner beans, a special pepper whose fruit is the size of pebbles, and other native plants that will grow through their cycle and be harvested for their seeds. These seeds get sorted at the farm and then go to Tucson, where they are

deposited in the seed bank, a place that holds what many people consider to be true treasure. Some of these seeds are frozen, while others are kept in just the right combinations of dryness and darkness.

Back in July a small but violent



Corn is pollinated by hand at Native Seeds / SEARCH



*Photos by Ann Katzenbach*

Matt Franz and Linda Prim with their favorite tractor at the Native Seed /SEARCH Farm.

storm hit the farm. Hail and winds up to 60 miles an hour arrived out of the blue, toppling the pollination tents and beating down the young plants. Several tents were destroyed, as were some plantings. Staff member Matt Franz, an adept fixer of broken things, has been restoring the tents. Matt is also skilled at inventing equipment for special purposes, and, along with many other projects, he created a special blade for everyone's favorite machine, the Farmall Cub, an antique tractor that just keeps doing its job.

Despite the difficulties, there have been many positive undertakings. One of these is collaboration with Borderlands and Deep Dirt Farm. Borderlands is leasing the greenhouse at the far northern end of the NS/S property, and its staff is growing native plants that they share with NS/S. The water harvesting and gardening going on at Deep Dirt Farm makes it a great neighbor for NS/S. There is always botanical information being shared up and down the valley.

The crew that works with Lynda puts in long hours. Clark Lydick is a volunteer who happily mows and tills and can repair broken machinery. Morgan Parsons was formerly a wildlife manager in Mississippi. Along with many other tasks, he spends long hours on the tractor keeping the cover crops and grasses mowed, hoping not to kill or injure moles, mice, snakes, or quail that

have made their home at the farm. Andrea Stanley is a Navajo/Acoma volunteer who, with Morgan, is looking for a local place to rent that they can afford because they hope to stay here. Kelsey Bearden comes from Tucson to work when she can, and Matt Franz, who was an apprentice last summer, now has a paid position farming and fixing everything. In addition, there is a crew from Tucson that comes down periodically to help pollinate corn, plant, and harvest. Everyone pitches in.

The search for seeds that began with the Tohono O'odham Nation has led NS/S to be educators, collaborators, and farmers. They are part of a wave of international organizations that believe that agricultural biotechnology will not support the world's growing population. Many innovations are challenging our food systems, most aiming toward one kind of seed and one genetically modified crop grown on huge farms. The contrast of small farms, diverse seeds, and resilient crops is a more positive look at the future, and it's sprouting right here on 60 acres.

You have a chance to visit the farm on the second weekend in October, when there will be farm tours associated with the annual Patagonia Fall Festival. By then most of the crops will be picked, but the seeds are what's important. At this farm the harvest is both the end and the beginning of a new cycle.

To learn more about NS/S and see all that they offer, visit their website: [nativeseeds.org](http://nativeseeds.org).

Sunday Service 10 a.m.  
Fellowship follows  
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Bible Study

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