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Plant Breeder Spotlight: Jeff McCormack



Founder of the [Southern Exposure Seed Exchange](http://www.southernexposure.com/) (SESE) and [Garden Medicinals and Culinarities](https://gardenmedicinals.com/) and co-founder of [Virginia Plant Savers](http://www.virginiaplantsavers.org/), Jeff McCormack has long played an important role in southeast plant breeding.

With a background in natural products chemistry and ecosystem dynamics, he moved to the south and began teaching at the University of Virginia in the 1970s. In 1982, Jeff and his wife Patty decided to start the seed company SESE, which offered a small but interesting collection of heirloom varieties. As he continued to grow the plant catalog, letters from customers doing their own breeding began to pique his interest. "I was really impressed with what some of them had been doing. [They were] using very sophisticated, effective methods for plant breeding even though they had no academic training," he says.

This correspondence led to Jeff's own experimentation, beginning with a successful cross between 'Tappy's Finest' tomato and the smaller 'Red Cherry' tomato. He continued to speak with other amateur plant breeders as well, learning how to apply selective pressure to the varieties he was

breeding. Naturally, of course, experimentation did not always end well: "It's kind of interesting, you take two good parents, and you cross them, and you always assume you're going to get...the best traits of both. But sometimes I ended up with results that were just pure dogs; it's just the way the genes sorted out."

In the decades since Jeff began this work, he has noticed encouraging changes in the field. Around the early 2000s, he began to see a greater focus on plant breeding in the non-academic community. In particular, he finds that many plant breeders are interested in the issue of corporate control of seed supplies, both in the U.S. and abroad. "I believe strongly in people being in control of their own seed supply," Jeff explains. It is for this reason that he wrote and has made publicly available [organic seed production manuals](http://www.savingourseeds.org/publications.html). "Today, those have been downloaded over 14,000 times...to countries all around the world. It feels good."



Jeff hopes to see this trend continue, hoping that it will take the form of regional seed banks. In the last few years, he has been sharing a number of varieties with the [Seed Savers Exchange](https://www.seedsavers.org/) in Iowa. He notes, however, that it is important to account for geographic differences when considering a plant's ability to thrive. "I'm delighted to have our varieties at Seed Savers, but they've got the sixty-foot-deep topsoil and they don't have the diseases and pest pressure that we have here [in the south]. And as they're grown out there, they're going to shift genetically." He hopes that regional seed banks can help us understand and record these changes.



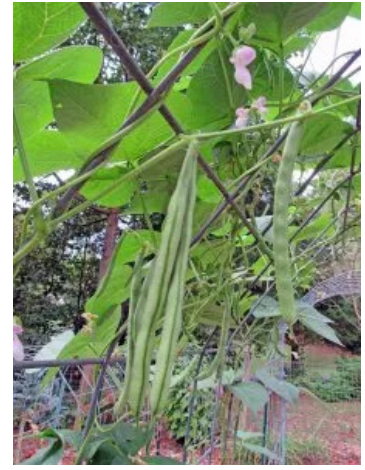
'Spanish White' garlic

'Crawford' lettuce

Today, Jeff is not actively seed breeding, but he nevertheless remains involved in the community. He maintains the website [Saving Our Seed \(http://www.savingourseeds.org/index.html\)](http://www.savingourseeds.org/index.html) to raise awareness around the topic of seed saving and conservation. Additionally, he still helps to evaluate heirloom varieties, some of which have not been previously introduced to the seed trade. Finally, he continues to have the opportunity to introduce new varieties to SESE as he encounters them through his other projects.

Varieties that he is currently growing or working with include:

- 'Spanish White' garlic
- 'Crawford' lettuce
- 'Green Savage' pole bean



'Green Savage' pole bean

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