

The Use of Local Crop Varieties in Organic Agriculture: Strengths and weaknesses

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Abstract

We are carrying out some projects about the role of local and traditional vegetable varieties in Spain, termed collectively Landraces, within present-day social, political, legal, and social climates. The aim is to find out if Landraces can contribute to the future of agricultural development, or whether they will remain largely underutilized, as they are at present.

Organic farmers cooperatives, in association with other farmers, researchers, and consumers, have been conducting several ethnobotanical projects to recuperate and develop Landraces and local cultural diversity since 1987.

One of the problems that the cooperatives have faced since the beginning is the lack of commercial varieties adapted for organic agriculture. For this reason, one of the practices adopted was the restoration of local varieties of horticultural crops, better adapted to the system of organic agriculture. This has involved the exchange of seeds with other farmers and the selection of seeds on the basis of a number of criteria, principally resistance to distinct adversities and the taste of local consumers.

The projects are being carried out in a participatory fashion and following objectives linked to the management of plant genetic resources in line with the needs of the cooperatives and the rest of the organic agricultural sector. The projects include more than 120 of the most common local varieties of horticultural crops in the area (e.g., tomatoes, eggplant, bell peppers, watermelon, melon, lettuce) and involved:

- ✓ Strengthening farmers' networks for the exchange and preservation of local varieties of seeds.
- ✓ Diversifying the financial resources of the cooperatives and creating alternative markets for organic seeds.
- ✓ Taking advantage of knowledge and genetic material restored during the years that the cooperatives have been functioning, and strengthening their use.
- ✓ Elaboration of an inventory and characterization of varieties with a view to restoring the knowledge of their use.
- ✓ Increasing on-farm biodiversity, including the use of wild plants from the area as forage and green manure.
- ✓ Offering to the organic sector the possibility of using seeds of traditional varieties, allowing the restoration of organoleptic and cultural characteristics associated with these varieties.
- ✓ Agronomic valuation of the varieties with the help of agronomic experts from the area.
- ✓ Participatory evaluation of the quality of the varieties, following criteria required by farmers and consumers.

The empirical selection criteria adopted by the organic farmers has allowed the maintenance in cultivation of local varieties, but has also permitted researchers to elaborate a valid system of in situ conservation that includes an active role for farmers and consumers.