

**Review: Heirloom Seeds and Their Keepers: Marginality and Memory  
in the Conservation of Biological Diversity**

By Virginia D. Nazarea

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Nazarea, Virginia D. *Heirloom Seeds and Their Keepers: Marginality and Memory in the Conservation of Biological Diversity*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2005. 193 pp. 0-8165-2435-1 (Cloth). US\$35.00.

Do heirloom seeds and the network of seedsavers make a quantifiable difference in genetic diversity that is large enough to pay attention to? It is clear that there has been substantial homogenization of agriculture on both a national and a global scale. There is also ample evidence that wild species of both plants and animals make significant genetic contributions to human health and welfare. But heirloom food crops represent a different aspect of the issue. They are not actually wild yet they possess genotypic and phenotypic characteristics that are not in the varieties that dominate the agricultural marketplace.

Gardeners and small-scale farmers choose to grow heirloom varieties for many reasons, from personal historical connections to the seeds to philosophical concerns about the proliferation of hybrid or genetically modified strains. Further interest results from intersections with the organic and locally grown food movements, local history, and interest in culinary variety. The cultural roots of the heirloom seed movement are varied, encompassing immigration patterns, rural gardening practices, and the back-to-nature movement. In the Internet era it does not take a great deal of effort to uncover rich and deep expressions of a vibrant, passionate, and energetic (though loosely organized) culture surrounding the protection and proliferation of heirloom varieties. But from all appearances the vast majority of human civilization— certainly western civilization—is indifferent to the erosion of local food ways if not actively engaged in the erosive processes.

Among the relevant scientific issues are the availability of genetic diversity and the genetic purity and history of strains that, in some instances, are grown and stored with inadequate attention to cross typing. The historical dimensions of the issue are too numerous to list here, but for me one of the most interesting is the link between the geographic origins of domestic foods and their current variety and development in various cultures. So it was with great interest that I read *Heirloom Seeds and Their Keepers*. The author,

Virginia Nazarea, is an anthropologist with considerable background in the role of agriculture both in individual and cultural memory and in practice. The work that she and her colleagues have done in the Philippines, Ecuador, the southern United States, and with Vietnamese émigrés to Georgia and Florida, is reviewed and synthesized throughout the book. As a result of her work Nazarea has come to believe that heirloom seedsavers are indeed a potent force for biodiversity conservation. But the effect of seedsavers' activities cannot be observed at the macro-scale that is typical of most studies of agriculture, biodiversity, culture, or conservation. The book is well organized and very well written, and offers compelling insights. It seeks to break through the "disturbing rigidity, linearity, and normativeness in current approaches" to biodiversity conservation and the "unfortunate failure of nerve" that characterizes our acceptance of this linearity. These are strong words and they are supported with an amazing array of stories and insights.

Nazarea states that her "intention in this book is to explore a road, not necessarily less taken but certainly less recognized, in the conservation of biodiversity." In the case of agriculture, biodiversity conservation is primarily about countering the hegemony of the monoculture imperative and its support structure, or as she puts it, "the perceived immorality of variation in the field." She views heirloom seedsavers as effective counter-actors in this historic struggle and illustrates her point using facts, inference, analogy, and metaphor. In several places she poses salient questions such as, "what is behind the persistence of diverse combinations of genes in fields and gardens in the context of homogenizing agricultural and cognitive monocultures?" This is the setting of the rest of the work.

Chapters 3 – 5 are dedicated to detailed presentations about seedsavers in the locations mentioned earlier. Chapter three concerns the ways that various people use heirloom seeds to root themselves in their ancestral lands and worldviews. Chapter four focuses on the American South and the insights gained as part of the Southern Seed Legacy project that Nazarea ran. Here she juxtaposes rural southern culture against the backdrop of globalization. In chapter five Nazarea focuses on Vietnamese émigrés to the U.S. and how they not only keep their memories alive through their gardens but use them to create their own sense of place in a land far from their origins. The pages are brimming with stories of the people she is describing, by turns funny, poignant, stirring, and tragic. The reader receives personal knowledge of these people and of the importance of gardens, food, and saving and sharing seeds to the life and culture they are trying to preserve.

Fascinating though the stories are, they are only a medium for Nazarea to convey her point, her conviction based on her experiences and learning that

these people and the uncounted others like them are participants in a great yet under-acknowledged process of biodiversity conservation. Nazarea considers the rapid erosion of agricultural genetic diversity an issue that is in urgent need of far more attention than it is getting. Through much of the book Nazarea asserts that it is industrial agribusiness that is perpetrating the homogenization of the global agricultural gene pool. In Chapter six she makes clear her belief that the scientific establishment is also culpable.

Calls for a post-modern science are increasingly numerous. They are often not as compelling as they might be because most are written with a tone that either fails to recognize or simply ignores the legitimate value of scientific inquiry. This book is different. Nazarea calls for a science that is "...big enough to accommodate a less deterministic, less Eurocentric, and less normative framework." If we compartmentalize biodiversity and develop conservation plans in the accepted sense we will inevitably lose the war. Perhaps worse, the methods of modern science themselves require a type of standardization that may also eliminate a substantial quantity of genetic diversity. In some ways science is its own enemy in this context. The final chapter acknowledges the vital role that science will continue to play, but never lets off the pressure for change in its approaches.

Nazarea has much to say that is highly contentious, probably intentionally so. Can such a less normative science exist? The emerging discipline of linking science to social institutions within the framework of complex systems analysis is a promising development.

Nazarea's book is rich with stories and information and complex in its narrative and thematic development. If you already know something about seed saving and heirloom crops you can read it for the breadth and depth of knowledge that the author brings to the subject. You can also use its many thematic progressions as sources for ideas on how to bring us closer to an existence that is sustainable before what we want to sustain is gone.

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