

# Seed growers find support at gathering

## BC seed production faces hurdles on road to commercial success

by RONDA PAYNE

RICHMOND – Information sharing and engagement is more important than one-way presentations at the annual BC Seed Gathering, now in its fifth year. Organized by Keeley Nixon with Farm Folk/City Folk's Chris Thoreau and Shauna MacKinnon, the event attracted about 100 enthusiasts.

Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Richmond was the main venue for proceedings, and gave attendees a glimpse of the new KPU seed lab in addition to the collective nature of the gathering itself.

"It's unlike a lot of gatherings where you go to learn," Thoreau says. "This, you go to participate. That engagement piece is really what people appreciate from this event. We're not just thinking about seed... we're also thinking about how people learn."

It's one reason the event is called a gathering and not a conference. It's heavy on social interaction because independent-minded, small-scale farmers need networks as much as the next grower. A forum for exchanging ideas is also critical, a need met by interactive panels and presentations.

"The first day was all focus groups and planning groups," Thoreau notes adding that in the second day, "We opened up to questions right away so 30 minutes of presentations and 30 minutes of questions."

One of the focus groups was BC Eco Seed Co-op's session that brought together existing and potential members. This format appealed to non-

commercial seed grower and young agrarian Jesse Howardson.

"The Seed Gathering for me is the event I know I'll get to see as many seed folk as possible and get to be immersed for two days talking exclusively about seed," she says. "The organizers did an amazing job this year bringing together a wide range of folks doing work in seed production and preservation across many communities."

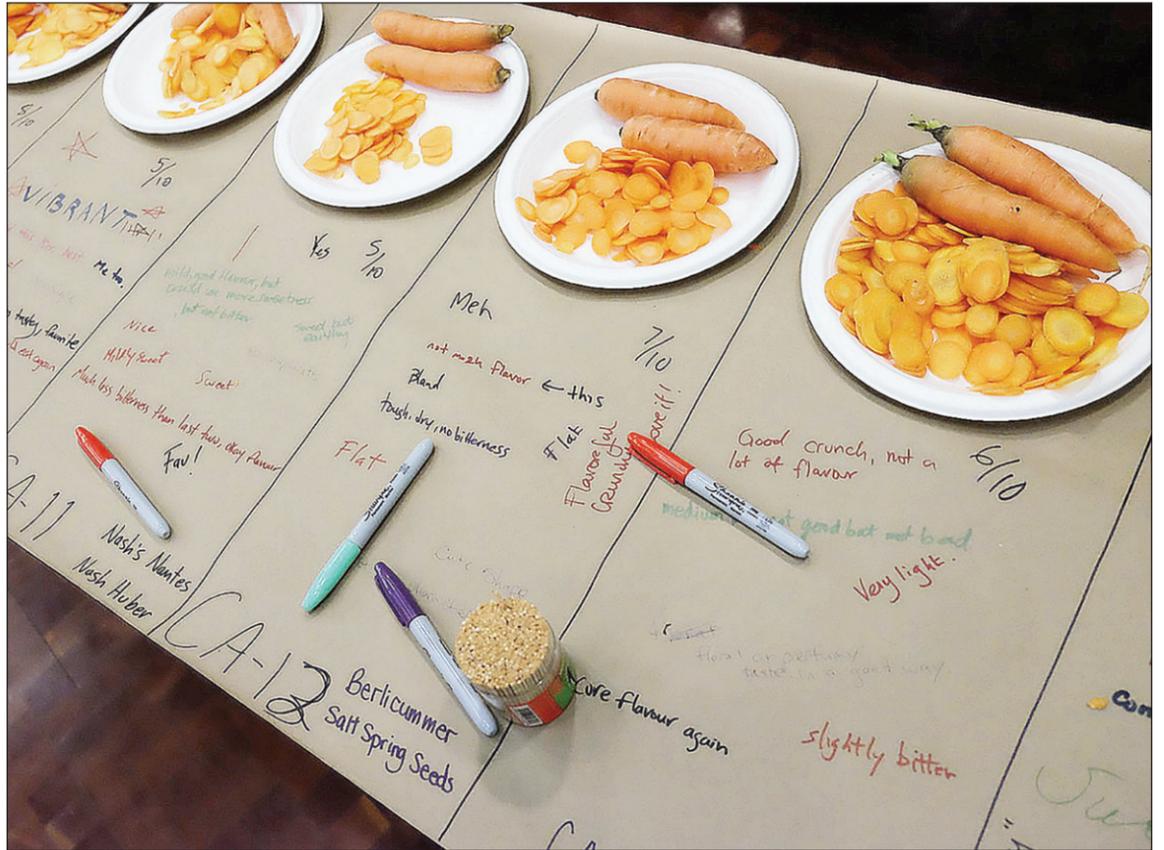
Some of the coming together happened in a focus group Thoreau led. With each of the questions asked during the focus group, every break-out group noted community engagement in the answering process. Among the important topics raised were quality seed and land access.

### Seeding action

Howardson sees involvement and interaction as essential to moving through the work needed to ensure locally produced seed enjoys traction with growers.

"For years now, there has been a lot more recognition and excitement for open-pollination and heirloom varieties, particularly within the home gardener community," she says, noting that smaller seed companies can be successful selling to those markets. "But something that this gathering and past ones have focused heavily on is the still-large amount of work to do to grow the regional seed production industry and be able to provide quality and quantity of reliable seed for farmers."

Thoreau agrees that promoting quality local seed



**TASTE MATTERS.** Delegates at the annual BC Seed Gathering had a chance to sample then add their two cents on carrot varieties. FARMFOLK / CITYFOLK PHOTO

to farmers will take time.

"A lot of farmers are reluctant to buy local seed because you don't know if it's good seed until it's too late," he notes. "With that [commercial] scale, we need to ensure that seed is true to type, good quality and germinates. Probably the number-one focus of the BC seed growers' co-op is seed quality – ensuring seed is what they say it is."

He sees the BC Eco Seed Co-op, established in 2015 as a result of the 2012 Seed

Gathering, as the foundation for the BC seed sector's growth.

"The co-op is there to serve

See CO-OP on next page >

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## CO-OP focus is quality

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the growers," he says. "People are really attracted to that in BC. ... The great thing about co-op versus corporations is that members themselves decide how to distribute the benefits."

### Reaping profits

Conversations and presentations weren't confined to seeds themselves. One presenter, Daniel Brisebois, is a founding

member of Tourne-Sol Co-operative Farm in Quebec. Brisebois focuses on the economics of seed growing.

"Increasing production is not essential to today's seed farmer. It is more important for farmers to manage their business well and make sure it is profitable at their current scale," Brisebois says. "Increasing production often comes with increasing costs

and even though you increase your gross sales, your net profit may stay the same – or in a worst-case scenario, your net profit might even drop."

He says profitability usually starts with understanding farm systems, then monitoring and evaluating them. While full-cost budgets per crop are what Brisebois feels give the most accurate picture of what's profitable, the budget exercise requires loads of data. He suggests looking instead at benchmarks of sales per bed or sales per acre. The smaller the amount of land, the greater the sales must be per acre. Boosting profits often comes from increasing prices, improving yields and reducing

overhead.

"Good management and planning are usually what makes any business profitable," he says. "Profitability usually means growing your crop as efficiently as possible – planting successfully, reducing weed-control while staying effective, timely harvest and quick cleaning and also selling everything you grow at a good price."

Support and resources from Farm Folk/City Folk and the Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security make the annual Seed Gathering and BC Eco Seed Co-op possible. Thoreau also notes that collaborations with UBC, KPU and UFV allow the gathering to thrive from year to year.



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