

Sowing Connections

Episode 2 • A Home for Living Seeds

From the Archives with Diane Ott Whealy

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As a young girl, Seed Savers Exchange co-founder Diane Ott Whealy remembers spending time on her grandparents' porch each summer surrounded by towering walls of morning glory flowers. Then each fall, when it was time to go back to school, she would help her grandfather, Baptist John Ott, collect seeds from those morning glories, just in case any visitors wanted some to take with them. When Diane grew older and was about to be married, she went back to her grandparents' farm to request some of those seeds to plant in her own garden. Her grandfather gave her a little pill box full of his treasured morning glory seeds, as well as a handful of 'German Pink' tomato seeds. He told her that her great grandparents had brought seeds of both varieties with them to the U.S. when they emigrated from Bavaria in the 1880s. Sadly, her grandfather passed away shortly after giving her those family heirloom seeds, and Diane began to worry what would happen to them if something happened to her or her garden since she was the only one growing them. These seeds that were so important to her and to her family suddenly felt vulnerable and fragile. Realizing that seed varieties cannot be preserved by one family alone, Diane and her then husband, Kent Whaley, invited other gardeners to share their own family heirloom varieties with one another and help safeguard each other's seeds for

future generations. Preserving seed diversity, they understood, takes a community. In 1975, that community of 29 gardeners became part of the very first seed exchange list published by Diane and Kent, and it's only grown from there. In fact, we still offer this seed exchange, which we now simply call The Exchange. And in 2026, 316 are sharing more than 13,000 varieties of seeds. As more and more families entrusted Seed Savers Exchange with their treasured varieties, Diane and Kent realized they needed a permanent home for the burgeoning collection. These seeds were living. They couldn't be tucked away on a shelf to be preserved. They needed to be grown and renewed to remain viable. They needed a farm. That search eventually led Diane and Kent back to Northeast Iowa to Heritage Farm, the home of Seed Savers Exchange. In this video recording originally released in 2022, Diane shares the story of how Heritage Farm came to be not only a place to grow seeds, but also a space where people can see, taste and experience the incredible diversity those seeds represent. Here's Diane Ott Whatley.

We had our seed collection in Missouri. People were generous in sending us their family seeds. And then we realized, oh, we have a living collection of seeds that people have entrusted us to maintain. So we started thinking about becoming land based. We decided to come back to Decorah so we could grow our collection out. And by that time, we had thousands of tomatoes and beans and peppers that needed to be renewed. So we rented land here in Decorah at the 4-H camp. And we realized when people came to see our gardens that, you know, we talked about genetic diversity, saving genetic diversity for so many years. And that's an abstract concept. You can't really describe what genetic diversity is. You can, but people don't really understand it until they can see it and they can taste it. So we thought, well, let's try to find a farm in northeast Iowa. So we put this ad in the paper like we wanted 50 acres. We had our list of criteria that probably sounded like we wanted paradise. Ray and Joanne Pritchard called us and said they had a property. So we went out to see it. And not only was it perfect, it was better than perfect. We wanted a barn where we have this barn. We wanted a beautiful setting. We

have this setting, we want it pines and there's pines and there's a stream. And it had everything that we thought would showcase our gardens. So needless to say, we bought the farm. It was 56 acres. So we're here, we have the house and you know, it's just lovely. And then we realized the pine woods right above us. A gentleman came to our door one night and he said, I own the pine woods. I'm going through a divorce and I need to sell it. And here are the options. I have it surveyed. We can log it. And here's what the money I would get for logging. My son thinks we should break it up and make it into a residential area. Here's what I could get with that. If we broke that up into lots. Or we could sell it to you. And of course, he knew us and like, how could we let that happen after we got the 56 acres? So we worked with him to get the pine woods, so we added that onto the property. Then we added on a place for our orchard and the limestone valley in the back. So that was lovely. It was like, you know, an opportunity to protect something forever, you know? And we're a nonprofit organization. Any time that we work to buy the land, it's been put in the nonprofit setting. So it'll never be developed, always be used for what we're using it for here. And it is paradise to me. I just think that there aren't many places like this because we have white pines, we have oaks, we have savannahs. We have. Wow. Yeah. It's just, you know, incredible. And I'm happy to share it now. Now people come from all over the country to come here and it's amazing. I mean, we're doing our work with the seed collection, but when I'm in the garden working here, they, they understand the collection and how what we're doing, but they really just love this place. They just love this place. And so I'm happy to share it with many people. And it'll be this way forever. Gato ride? Yeah. So then we come here and this is, this would have been the end of Seed Savers [Exchange] property. And Kent and I, every night we'd walk down after dinner in the summer and stand right here and we think, wow, this is, this has to be the most beautiful spot in the country. And what was going to happen to this. I mean, when we first looked at this, this was all one, our beautiful [Ancient] White Park cattle weren't in the valley, but so it was just this massive amount of green and quiet. And the only thing that we'd ever hear is a blue heron coming in quietly at the end of the day. So we just

thought, wow, this is, this is a real special place. Then when we learned that it was going to be for sale and broken up into ten different parcels, we were like, this can't happen. You know, we just got to get this land. So that was. So we began our quest to purchase Twin Valley Farms. Yeah, yeah. Usually they're not that willing to... This little that what's left of that little granary. Um, her name is it was the Meier family. And I interviewed her once because she lived down here with five kids, and she said their road went down the valley. And she said, everybody thinks it's so romantic and so beautiful to live down here. But it wasn't, you know, it was snow and we'd be snowed in for days. I was sitting up on top of the chute, and there I was surrounded by cows. There was deer down across from the pond. Yeah, like snow and a bald eagle flying overhead. I know it's got everything gorgeous. Couldn't believe where I was at. Still can't believe. Yeah I know. Every place in the farm is my favorite. But this kind of really is my favorite. We called it Inspiration Point because you can't come here and not reflect on peace, quiet, green trees, life. It is the place to come. But when we were trying to put together the funding for Twin Valley Farms, which was going to be a little bit of a stretch, so I have, I had a file in my office called "Inspiration". And so I went to that and I put, I've been putting stuff in there my whole life, little quotes, anything that I thought that kind of touched me. And there was a quote in there, it was from Aristotle. And he said, "Educating the mind without educating the heart isn't education at all". And I thought, that's so true. I mean, you can you can know everything, but you have to feel it. And so that's what I think we have done here, is that we've created a space where people can feel. And you need to, if you're going to preserve something, you need to love it. And to love it, you need to understand it, and to understand it, you need to see it so it all works together. So I just, I get an overwhelming sense of inspiration when I'm here. So there are farms all up and down this valley. Jim McClain, a neighbor, told me the story about the Bowery, which was like just a a wooden stage that they'd have during prohibition. They were, you didn't have a lot of music or drinking. And he said the Bowery was set up right across the street from that for that road right there. So that was set up there, and they'd have a contest to see who could make the

best moonshine. So all these farmers, all the little homesteaders, would come, they'd have their best moonshine, they'd hang lanterns all the way down the valley. So they went to the dance because they knew they were going to need the lanterns to guide their way home. But he said, quite honestly, most of them didn't make it home. They just all kind of, you know, slept down there. So they. So I visualize this. I can feel, you know, that that community of the homesteaders all walking down with picnics and their and their home brew, going to the Bowery for the dance and then just, you know, celebrating their little neighborhood community. So I always feel that when I'm up here. And now, of course, it's changed. There's just foundations left of the houses. But but at one time, everybody loved this, this land. And you can still see remnants of, of apple trees or rhubarb patches or lilacs that, you know, they had around their homestead. So it's sort of to celebrate a life once lived that, you know, we can still remember up here. So we have Canoe Creek on that side. This side. I'm so pleased we called, we called that Spring Pine Spring Creek because originally Heritage Farm was called Pine Spring Farm. Colonel Taylor named it that because of all the pines. And then there was a big spring there as well. So we. So that was one thing I was most proud of. And Jim was with us when we did all this, but they had the biggest spring was was a pond right behind the barn. And so every year it was nice to have the pond, but it was starting to grow a lot of algae. The spring couldn't wasn't strong enough to keep bubbling through all the topsoil that washed in. So we decided to take the pond out, which was kind of a big deal. And so we drained it for a year or just gradually drained it. And then we, the spring was reborn. We were there when we opened it up and it got to run down its own little course again, which enabled us to have trout in the stream. And the pond kept the water warm so that the fish weren't thriving, and they needed cold water, pure water. So we had both. So then we introduced the native brook trout to to the stream. And so now we have the Pine, Spring Creek and Canoe Creek merging right down there. And then it goes down to the Upper Iowa River, down right over here. So that's Canoe Creek. Across here. Korbin and I were walking across. At one time it was just full of goldenrod. Oh, yeah. As soon as we stepped into the field,

the monarchs just exploded. I had the best time today, sharing Heritage Farm and Twin Valley Farms with everybody. I don't get out that often anymore to see everything, and it just is a good reminder of why this was important in our life and important for our organization. Just seeing the bobolinks and the [Ancient] White Parks grazing in the valley and the Canoe Creek, and just knowing that we did the right thing. So that's very, very reaffirming to me, and I look forward to sharing it with many, many more people in the future. Um, the thing about Heritage Farm that I've always felt is like it's Seed Savers [Exchange's] home place. It's like, this is where we live. We're providing what an environment should feel like. And that's what I'm most proud of. I'm proud of our seed collection. And we have 25,000 different accessions of seed. And then we have the land to complement the collection. And so that's been very important to us to, to showcase our collection and get people inspired. And I think Heritage Farm, when we were looking for a place to do our work. Growing up on a dairy farm, I wanted a barn. So that was part of our criteria. But when we drove up here and I saw that barn, I thought that you sold me at the barn. It really, truly is a home place because the barn is the heart of all dairy farms and because so much happens there. So I feel like we are providing a good heart and a home place for Seed Savers Exchange. And I just hope that many people will come and share it with us.

Seed Savers Exchange didn't begin with the farm. It began with one family wondering how to keep a few varieties of cherished seeds from being lost. The answer wasn't simply to save the seeds, it was to build a community willing to grow them, share them, and preserve them for future generations. Heritage Farm became the home of that growing community and for the living collection that we continue to care for today. Thanks for joining us for this episode of "From the Archives" on *Sowing Connections*. We'll be back in two weeks with a featured conversation with Marion Nestle. Until then, thanks for helping keep these stories and these seeds growing. We'll see you soon.