

Episode 4: A Passion for Seeds

From the Archives with Neil Lockhart

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Neil Lockhart

And I'd say Marina's must be the same way, you know. She says, if you say it's good, I know that it is, you know. That's kind of odd that somebody that you've never met and never dealt with until four or five years ago over in Russia decides that, hey, if Neil Lockhart said it was good, you better try it. Well, that means a little bit of something to me.

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Lissie

[music] Sowing Connections.

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Melody Reese

Many of the seed varieties preserved by Seed Savers Exchange are cared for not only by our nonprofit staff, but also by a community of gardeners who grow them and share them each year.

One way they do this is through The Exchange: the Seed Savers Exchange gardener-to-gardener seed swap that is available online and through our annual print publication called The Yearbook. Gardeners who share seed on the exchange are known as Listers.

Neil Lockhart is one of those Listers, and has been a part of the exchange community for over 30 years. During that time, he has grown thousands of tomatoes, made friendships with seed

savers from around the globe, and helped preserve rare heirloom varieties by growing them out, collecting fresh seed and sharing them with others.

In this conversation, originally recorded in 2022, Neil reflects on the relationships he's made along his seed saving journey, the excitement of rediscovering a variety that was nearly lost, and why he believes every gardener has a part to play in keeping our shared food heritage alive. I'm Melody. This is "From the Archives" on *Sowing Connections*. I am so glad you're here.

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Neil Lockhart

I'm Neil Lockhart and we are at the Belair Community Center at Bellair, Illinois, which is about two miles from my house.

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Interviewer

You said you grew up around here, right?

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Neil Lockhart

I lived here, I've lived in the house that I'm living in now, where my garden is my whole life.

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Interviewer

I want to just ask you a kind of a big general question, which is why do you save seeds.

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Neil Lockhart

If you don't save seeds? How are you going to grow them next year?

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Interviewer

How did you first hear about Seed Savers [Exchange]?

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Neil Lockhart

Actually, the first time I knew anything about the Seed Savers, I don't know what publication that I had, but they had like a little square inch add in something, but I did not join in that point in time. I did not join until probably 1992. And then that first year I was just a member. But the next year I became a listed member.

But I had been saving seeds, probably, oh, I don't know, maybe for ten years before that. Both of my from both sides of my family, but my grandparents was all gardeners and my parents were gardeners too. So I'd say I've got some of the gardening blood running through my veins, probably.

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Interviewer

For people who don't already know. Can you describe what it means to be a listed member?

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Neil Lockhart

Well, that means that you have saved a lot of seeds, and it can be any kind of fruit or vegetable or flower or whatever. And you offer them through the Savers Exchange and their Yearbook, and you offer your seeds in there, and you exchange seeds, trade seeds with people all over the world. I don't know, as time goes on, you just keep making more contacts with people and pretty soon you don't have to look for new tomatoes and stuff. They just start coming to you.

You make friends out there along the way and they keep you in new tomato varieties, new heirloom varieties to try and. Well, the most influential person that would come to my mind is Carolyn Male.. She was a member of the Seed Savers Exchange and very close friend of mine for many years.

There's a lot of tomatoes in my garden this year that I planted just specifically, not just because they're good, but because they're Carolyn Male tomatoes. In the last, even though Carolyn wasn't very active in the Seed Savers Exchange because of her health issues that she was plagued with for so many years, there was still half a dozen of us that... basically I talked her into still collect seeds and give them to us.

We'll grow the seeds and you can still be a part of this, even though you're not an active member and don't have to do a lot of work. If you collect these seeds from the, you know, your tomato seeds from the contacts that you've made over the years and then give it to us. You're still a big contributor, you know, and I probably have 15 or 20 varieties from Carolyn Male that there ain't nobody else other than the source and me that probably have, you know, and I feel it's very important to get them out there, you know, for other people to try because...

I can give you a little story on a tomato. Many years ago, I got a tomato off of Carolyn with the simple name of 'Wes'. Well, I grew 'Wes' for several years and it was one of my favorite

tomatoes. But I let this tomato 'Wes' slip through my fingers, and nobody else in The Exchange hardly was growing it. But two people I'll not mention their names, but I got seeds from both of them people within the next two years. After my seed was like 15 years since I'd made it grow out of it and was really old, I planted these other people's seeds and that did not give me the 'Wes' tomato that I knew that I had. Well, finally this next year, there was a lady in the Seed Savers that acquired a seed collection, we'll say, and she offered the variety 'Wes', but it was from this other man's old seed collection.

Well, she sent me my 25 'Wes' seeds in the mail, and I planted half of them to begin with. I had finally, after three weeks, one seedling came up. So I took my other half and I made sure I did a really nice job and planted the other three. That one plant was the only 'Wes' that I got to come up. When he was on the growing table with the other tomatoes, I put him in the center so you know, and something might happen to one out on the edge, but I protected in the middle.

Of course, I was nervous all year about that tomato. As soon as I set him out in the garden, I immediately put it to me to catch over him so a bird or something would not peck him. Anyway, I'm watching that tomato develop and there was one that set really, really early on, the tomato on the plant, you know, and was hanging out of the cage over the side. Well it got so big that on my cages they're four by four squares, you know. And that tomato got so it was squishing in between the wires. So I had to spread the wires to make it bigger. Anyway, I'm watching to see if he's going to be the same, if the 'Wes' tomato is going to be the correct caller first. I already knew it was the correct shape because you could see the heart, you know, shape come on early. But finally it started coloring up and I'd go out there every day to see how much more it turned.

I mean, I checked on that tomato daily. And finally the day that I picked him, I thought, he needs one more day on the vine to be perfectly ripe. But not that that's going to hurt me for seed saving purposes, but he needs one more day on the vine to be perfectly ripe. Well, they was forecasting a heavy rain the next day, so I waited until dark the evening before to pick him, and then I let him sit on the counter in the house for a day before I sliced it.

And like I say, it was the best tomato, and not just because I nurtured it. It was the best tomato that I ate last year, you know, let's. And I had originally got it off of Carolyn Male and I believe she got it off of, this is from memory, but I believe she got it off of a lady many years ago that was in the Seed Savers Exchange or not. That was Rosella Richardson, I believe. That could be not right, but I believe that's correct. But I searched far and wide to get that tomato back and it was just about lost. It ain't no more. There's three out in my garden and I have not only seeds off of that pound-and-a-half, and I have the rest of the plant. You know, I collected several hundred seeds off of it, so I'm confident that it will survive for now. If, if I could get other people to grow it out.

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Interviewer

How did you get started growing tomatoes?

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Neil Lockhart

Well, like I say, I've always been a gardener because of my grandparents. They both had probably as large gardens as what I did, and my mom and dad usually had a pretty large garden. And actually what got me on the tomato kick is they're probably it. Corn and potatoes are probably my favorite things out in the garden.

And one year I just started, I decided I would see how many different varieties I could come up with. So I went to all the greenhouses within about 50 miles of here in a radius, and seen how many varieties I could come up with, and I came up with some 20 some varieties, and that kind of started me in.

I saved seeds off a few of them that I knew was heirlooms, and then soon after that probably became a member of the Seed Savers. But I was already doing my own seed saving before I had started in with the Seed Savers Exchange.

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Interviewer

Do you remember what was the first tomato that you grew?

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Neil Lockhart

Yes, I do, 'Brandywine', I can tell you a little story on that.

Some of the first seeds that I saved was out of the 'Brandywine' tomato, and I put them in nothing but a paper envelope, you know, like you would use at Seed Savers Exchange, stored them in the dark inside a plastic jar, inside a drawer in my bedroom. 26 years later, just by chance, I happened to pull that pack of seeds out.

That was 26 years old. And even though I already had 'Brandywine' planted for that year, I pulled them other 'Brandywine' seeds out. I just wanted to see if I could get anything to germinate. Now, let me tell you, I probably planted 200 seeds and it probably took them a month to germinate, but I got three seeds to come up out of 26 year old seed.

Is there tricks to getting old seed to come up? There he is. But I'm not going to tell you all of them. There's more than one method. Each person uses their own methods. There's many methods, but if a seed has got any germination in it or whatever, if it's a tomato seed, I will get it to come up. I mean, if you give me a decent sample of seeds, I've been sent seeds by Carolyn, Male and other people. They said there's, we don't think there's no germination left in them. There is.

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Interviewer

Do you have advice for anyone who's dealing with old tomato seeds?

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Neil Lockhart

Well, my first thing would be tell them that if you're really wanting to preserve them and keep them for a long time, get them in the freezer or make sure they're airtight and put them in the freezer. They'll keep forever. You're not losing no germination while you're in the freezer, as long as they're airtight. Now, just keeping them at room temperature, I feel confident I can show you my pots on some of the old seeds that I planted in what year I said the seeds saved seeds were from. You know, I can show you. Like, for instance, I know I planted 4 or 5 varieties from 2009 that germinated just fine for me. Did I sow more seeds than you normally would? Yes, but that's what seed preservation is about. You know, if you're working with somebody in the Seed Savers Exchange, a big collector like me, Bill Minkey and other people that has huge collections of tomatoes, don't complain that you only got 1 or 2. Be happy that you got any to come up with, because we are maintaining thousands and we're doing more work than we can possibly do, you know, than any one person can do.

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Interviewer

How many kinds of tomatoes are in your garden today?

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Neil Lockhart

There is 192 varieties right now in my garden, and I have about 100 more that hopefully will be set out within the next week. And then probably 30 or 40, that will be 3 or 4 weeks from now.

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Interviewer

So what is your growing process like? How do you get them to not cross-pollinate?

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Neil Lockhart

For one thing, a tomato has got a perfect blossom. It doesn't need anything to pollinate it. It will pollinate itself. Possibly a honeybee. Bet you don't see one today around my house. The honeybees. The honeybees don't work at tomato, but a bumblebee is what I meant will work a little bit. If you maintain 4 or 5 or 6 foot, most of the time you're not going to get across pollination.

I'm not telling you that I haven't never had a tomato cross-pollinate, but it's rare. And sometimes in cross-pollination that you get, that doesn't mean all the seeds you saved or cross-pollinate it. It can be only one tomato on the whole plant. You know that you got a mixed seed in. You think, okay, so if you're seed saving, then you don't save unless you like it seeds off of what's cross

pollinated. You save for that variety what you only know is true and make sure it is not close. Like if you've got, say, three plants and the end one produced a tomato, that is wrong, don't save tomatoes from it or the plant next to it. Let's use the one over here on the end and save all of our tomatoes on it. You know, because you've got better odds, but you don't have a lot of cross-pollination in this [part of the] country. Not on tomatoes.

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Interviewer

Do you have any more varieties that have interesting stories?

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Neil Lockhart

Oh, I'm sure I have lots of them. I mean, there's been a few of them cross-pollination that I've saved. One of the last seeds that I got off of Carolyn Male was a tomato called 'Rosedale', and it may not be an heirloom. I don't think it's an heirloom. I actually think it was bred by Bill Jeffers down at Evansville, Indiana. I think he did the breeding on it, but she had had them seeds in an envelope for several years. And finally, before she passed, she let me have what she had, you know, that she knew wasn't out there. And it was one of them the first year that I planted it. It's supposed to be a black potato leaf on a potato leaf plant and be a black tomato.

I got one that was green on a potato leaf plant. There's only one, a couple other green-when-ripes, 'Green Giant' being one of them that's on a potato leaf plant. This is not 'Green Giant'. It's not the same shape. It's not the same flavor. It's the biggest green tomato that I've ever grew. It came out I call it 'Green Rosedale' because I got it out of the pack of 'Rosedale'.

I do not think it was a cross pollination, because if it was a cross pollination, it was pure from day one, because every year I grew it, which is six now. Thereafter, every plant that I've grown has been identical, and I get a pound and a half green tomato on a potato leaf plant that is not 'Green Giant'. It's different shaped. I don't know what this tomato is. I just call it 'Green Rosedale'. But it's interesting to me.

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Interviewer

You've talked about your connection with Carolyn and how you've received so many seeds there. And I'm curious if you have any other stories about connections that you've made specifically through exchanging seeds.

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Neil Lockhart

Yeah, I can give you a good one right now. This happened before the Ukrainian... I don't know why on some of this stuff, which I always give Jesus credit for a lot of this stuff. But this is before Ukraine and Russia started their conflict. We'll call it a war going on over there. I had already pulled probably two thirds of the Russian and Ukrainian tomatoes in my tomatoes, and already had them in the ground before this ever happened.

Why did this happen? I don't know, I think, you know, I think maybe Jesus told me to do that, you know, that people in Ukraine and Russia may be needing their heirlooms back someday. One of my best tomato people over in Russia. I didn't contact her this year because of what's going on, but I'm going to in the future. But her name is Marina. She said that she has noticed one of the things that she had told me by. She got a lot of seeds off of Tatiana up in Canada, and she got, I forget who, her other source here that she got a lot of seeds off of, but she said

she had noticed that when she looked at seed descriptions that if me or Carolyn Male said that it was good tomato, that it is a good tomato, and some of these other people's opinion to her means very little, but our opinion meant more because our taste buds are the same.

If Caroline Male told me, with only one exception, that a tomato was good, it was a good tasting tomato. Our taste, or just was just the same. And I'd say Marina's must be the same way. You know, she says, if you say it's good, I know that it is. You know, that's kind of odd that somebody that you've never met and never dealt with until 4 or 5 years ago over in Russia decides that, hey, if Neil Lockhart said it was good, you better grow it. Well, that means a little bit of something to me. But she has been a big help to me getting me Russian and Ukrainian varieties, and we just trade heads up or it don't even have to be even, you know, she gives me what I want in her collection. I give her what I want and my collection and actually most of my Seed Savers Exchange people, you know, that I deal with, there's no money exchanged hands. We don't want money. You know, we we want somebody to preserve this seed.

Craig LeHoullier sent me an email other day and he is wanting to know what is the freshest. 'Dorothy's Green' tomato seed that I had. his is very old and he needs a fresh supply. Well, Craig is a good friend of mine through the Seed Savers, but I hate it that I haven't pulled his tomato. But I don't have time right now. Craig's going to either have to plant it in a week when I pull the seed out that he's wanting, or he's going to have to wait until next year.

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Interviewer

Can you talk about the growing conditions and how that's related to your practices with growing tomatoes?

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Neil Lockhart

Well, I'd say the main thing is the wind. You have to stake a tomato plant where I live, there ain't no or the wind's going to tear it to pieces, or you've got to have a, you've got to have a cage in or at least a stake, you know, to hold it in place because the wind is going to blow it over and you got tomatoes laying on the ground around here. They're going to rot. You got to get them off the ground. So yes, I do have a thousand tomato cages that has to be pulled and put on every year. That's a lot of work.

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Interviewer

Are there people in your family that help you with your garden?

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Neil Lockhart

Heck no. Yeah, they'll help eat it. [laughter]

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Interviewer

[laughter] I meant, like putting up the tomato cages, planting. You do that all yourself?

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Neil Lockhart

No. The garden's mine.

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Interviewer

Okay.

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Neil Lockhart

I do have people help me occasionally when I get in a bind or whatever, you know, and I do have people that I can hire to do it, but I need the exercise and all that. I can't do what I used to do. I just plug along at my slower speed. Now I have a lot more aches and pains. That's the reason that Neil started about six years ago, collecting supplement troughs, because he knows one of these days he's not going to be able to bend over again, but he has a big pile of good dirt out there in about 100 and some supplement troughs. Hey, it's a lot easier to garden if you don't have to bend over or bend over very far Or you can sit on a chair right there and tend your tomato, your tomato plant, instead of having to bend over all the way to the ground.

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Interviewer

What is your favorite dish made with tomatoes?

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Neil Lockhart

Tomato pie. My sister makes the best ones in the world. Tomatoes and your choice of different cheeses in it. Probably some milk and eggs. And you bake it in the oven and bring it out and you eat till you get sick. Then you go eat some more. They use mayonnaise in it sometimes, sometimes Miracle Whip on the inside.

There's just there's a if you get on the internet, you'll find all kinds of recipes. You just keep going on them until you hit on one that you like. And I think about anybody that likes tomatoes and cheese and eggs, would like a tomato pie, I mean, you can make it your whole meal.

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Interviewer

Do you have anything else that you like to grow with your tomatoes?

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Neil Lockhart

You mean just stuff that I like to grow in the garden? Yeah, I like to grow a little bit of everything, you know, green beans, corn, potatoes, squash, okra. I like it all. There's nothing from the garden that isn't good, you know?

In the past, I grew out over a hundred varieties of garlic at one time. At one time, I had over 1200 kinds of irises, heirloom irises. At one time, I had 30 some heirloom rose bushes. I still have over 100 kinds of heirloom apple trees out in the orchard that is very overrun and not, it needs attention. Let's just say it like that.

All that stuff. I'm just, I'm obsessive compulsive when I start stuff like that. And I wouldn't want to be any other way. I mean, I've had doctors tell me I'm obsessive compulsive. That's the only way I know how to live. I mean, whatever I do, I get into, you know, all the way. I mean, who else wants to beat theirself for weeks out in the garden, in the hot sun?

You know, nobody needs a thousand tomato plants each year. You know, it is a passion. But I'm passionate about everything I do. I go, I go all in. That's the only thing I know. And that's what keeps me ticking.

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Interviewer

Do you have any advice for anyone who wants to start seed saving or start a tomato collection like you have?

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Neil Lockhart

Well, the first thing they need to do probably is join the Seed Savers Exchange and then start. Don't be scared to save seeds. So what if you got a cross? You know you probably didn't. But you know, isolate it by a few feet or whatever on a tomato you're probably not going to get a cross if you're growing other things. A lot of them is not bad about crossing, either. You know, don't be afraid to list seeds. It's worth it. You're going to make a lot of friends and contacts and have a lot of fun that you couldn't have if you don't join the Seed Savers Exchange.

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Melody Reese

Neil Lockhart reminds us that saving seeds is not only about preserving the past, it's also about building relationships to help ensure that these varieties continue into the future. Every exchange of seed forms another connection between gardeners across generations and sometimes across continents. Together, these individual acts of stewardship help ensure that unique varieties remain available for the people who grow them next.

If you want to learn more about Seed Savers Exchange, explore the Yearbook or discover how you can be involved in helping to preserve our shared food heritage, visit us at SeedSavers.org. Thank you for joining us for this episode of *Sowing Connections*. Subscribe so you don't miss our next featured episode with long time farmer and community organizer Elizabeth Henderson. It'll be here in two weeks. We'll see you soon.

00:25:27:00

Lissie

[music] There's knowing and growing and sowing connections. *Sowing Connections*.