

Big step ahead for seed database- www.organicXseeds.com

1800 new varieties online: The last month brought some good news for our database organicXseeds (oXs). First of all we could enter more than 1800 new varieties. Most of them were sent by our partner Soil Association who registers for 60 organic seed companies in England (see also press release of SA). Secondly, the European Union is not averse to declare oXs as tool to inspect the Organic Seed Regime (see Newsletter on organic seeds and plant breeding March issue). Of course, nothing is yet decided, but it means at least, that the presentation of the database impressed the EU-officials.

It is now our duty, to convince the officials of the member states to join this European solution and not to build up national seed-databases. An important partner for oXs would also be the European Seeds Association (ESA) who represents the biggest European seed companies. We got already in touch with ESA officials and hope, the option to register seed data only once for whole Europe, convinces them, not to support national solutions. Main argument for oXs should be fully up-to-date information and easy use for suppliers as well as for farmers. Of course there is still much we could do better. Your corrections and suggestions to improve the performance of oXs are always most welcome.

Outline of oXs as inspection tool: If oXs will be declared inspection tool for the EU, the farmers who search organic seeds will be obliged to check the availability on oXs. Since not every farm has internet access, the appointed distributor has to check the availability of seeds on oXs. If there is no offer actually, oXs will print a form, which attests the unavailability. This attest the farmer presents to the inspection bodies together with the receipt of the purchased conventional seeds. This procedure would need no prior application for derogation.

To make this system reliable, it's necessary to have at least 80- 90% of the organic seed offer online on oXs and to be always fully up-to-date.

Of course, there are many problems of detail left to be solved. The following questions should be discussed at organic federations:

- Have the farmers free choice of varieties, or are they obliged to use another, appropriate organic variety on offer?
- At what distance the farmers would be obliged to order organic seeds and at which price? If there is no offer in the own country, is the farmer obliged to buy foreign organic seeds?
- If free choice of variety is restricted, the national organic federations have to list varieties which are valid as substitutes. This should be quite easy for wheat or potatoes, two species which are often officially tested and well documented. To group the equivalents of vegetables could cause much more worries.

A positive side-effect we expect is, that eventually the number of derogation per variety could be published at the end of the plant season. This deficit in supply could be a hint to companies to produce more of the demanded seeds.

For Switzerland we decided to have the first information meeting with the pressure group "organic seeds" already in April. We hope that the discussion on this problems starts as well in other countries. With support of the national organic federations it should be possible to convince national authorities of the central database oXs. It should be in our own interest to have a strong instrument controlled by the organic federations and finally to improve the organic seeds market.

By [Andreas Thommen](#)

Introduction course "selection in own farmer's hand"

This year Stichting Zaadgoed offers an introduction course for organic growers to orientate on possibilities and consequences of on-farm selection and breeding varieties. Stichting Zaadgoed therefore invites

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several experts to make a start in teaching growers about selection. This will be done in 4 afternoons spread over this year.

More and more that several organic growers mention that they wonder if it would be interesting for them to do the selection themselves for a crop their heart goes out to and to look for improvements for open pollinated varieties for organic farming systems. But selection is a skill, and when you really choose for it, one can learn it. But what is involved? Some farmers underestimate the implications of such work involved. Next to some theoretical background about the breeding process and genetics, selection fields will be visited. A group of 20 organic growers have started this introduction course.

By [Edith Lammerts van Bueren](#)

Characterizing gene bank material for organic farming systems

The Wageningen gene bank CGN is looking for ways to put more effort in a contribution to organic breeding. Therefore it would be useful if the gene bank material is characterized under organic conditions with criteria that are important for organic farming systems. A project has now been set up together with the Louis Bolk Institute and three organic onion growers who are already involved with selection activities to improve open pollinated onion varieties. In 2002 35 onion accessions from the gene bank collection will be screened under organic farm conditions, for suitability for organic growth. In 2003 six groups of populations will be developed by CGN by crossing the most suitable accessions. The harvested seeds will be given to this group of growers for further selection.

The project will also provide a basis for a follow-up project:

- Obtaining scientific insight in the effect of selection in different environments and by different growers on the genetic composition of populations
- Developing a participatory breeding method for larger groups of growers who want to work with different crops.

By [Edith Lammerts van Bueren](#)

Sustainable Organic Plant Breeding report on the ECO-PB Web Site

Until now, organic farmers have largely depended on varieties developed in the conventional breeding system. In the interests of organic agriculture itself, it is important that this situation is not accepted indefinitely, especially with genetic engineering rapidly becoming commonplace in conventional breeding. The organic agricultural sector must waste no more time in developing an organic plant breeding system. Naturally, a list must be drawn up of desirable characteristics for varieties which are to be used in organic production. But decisions should also be made about how these varieties are to be bred and propagated. In other words, which breeding techniques tie in with the principles of organic production?

In this report, we present a comprehensive vision of organic plant breeding. The report also presents a step by step plan for the realisation of a sustainable organic plant breeding system based on an alternative concept of plant health. The report is an important step towards such a system.

The full report of [Edith Lammerts van Bueren](#) et al. is now online available at the ECO-PB Web Site www.ECO-PB.org/09/5036.pdf

By [Klaus-Peter Wilbois](#)

Organic Seed and Plant Breeding Roundtable during IFOAM Scientific Conference

Brian Baker of OMRI, USA co-ordinates a workshop discussion group on organic seeds and plant breeding to be held at the IFOAM Scientific Conference in Victoria, Canada in August 2002. The roundtable offers an opportunity for organic farmers, plant breeders, developers, seed companies, and certification agents, and interested members of the public to discuss the opportunities and challenges the organic seed market faces. The participants will be interviewed by the moderator, and will be given the opportunity to prepare answers to the questions in advance. The panellists will have an opportunity to prepare their remarks. Participants will discuss the various standards requirements for organic seed, and the impact that genetic engineering is having on the seed industry.

The intention of the workshop is to inform interested members of the organic community about the availability, benefits, obstacles, and solutions to develop organic varieties and supply organic seeds. For further information contact [Brain Baker](#).

By [Klaus-Peter Wilbois](#)

Fighting the Blight

is the title of an article by [Professor Martin Wolfe](#), Director of Research at Elm Farm Research Centre that is available on the ECO-PB Web Site: www.ECO-PB.org/09/fighting_blight.pdf
The article reports on interesting news on potato blight resistance breeding.

By [Klaus-Peter Wilbois](#)

Over 100 organic farms could be at risk of contamination from new CM trials

There is 'chaos and confusion' over GM buffer zones according to the Soil Association which estimates that over 100 organic farms could be at risk of contamination from the current round of genetically modified crop test sites. Planting is due to start from Friday (15 March) despite new Government confusion over buffer zones to prevent the spread of GM pollen.

Research published this week by the Soil Association shows that 111 organic farms are close to the 44 fields of GM spring oil seed rape, sugar beet and fodder beet. More farms could be affected by the next round of GM maize planting, due to be announced on Monday (11 March). GM crops will be grown on a total of around 120 sites this year. The Government is still recommending that only a 200-metre buffer zone is maintained between GM and other similar crops. This is twenty-five times lower than the 5km limit for oil seed rape put forward by the European Commission to protect seed purity. Even with this safety margin, the Commission has admitted 0.3% of organic and non-organic oil seed rape seed could be contaminated. In the United States, where GM contamination is now widespread, double the UK buffer zone (400m) is used.

"The Government is in a state of chaos and confusion over GM buffer zones," says Peter Melchett, the Soil Association's Policy Director. "It has always said that it will protect the right of British consumers to chose non-GM British food. But over the last few months, their two main advisory committees have told them that current practice risks destroying that choice." In his recent report on the Future of Farming and Food, Sir Don Curry told the Government that "a new regulatory monitoring approach is needed" in order to protect consumers' right to chose uncontaminated food. The Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission, which comprises independent experts, has previously warned that the trial sites could put organic and non-organic farms at risk. The final round of trial sites will be planted in the autumn and the Government is due to decide next year whether some GM crops can be grown commercially in the UK.

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"This looks like being an entirely academic decision, as at present there is absolutely no market for GM food in the UK or the rest of Europe. No farmer in their right mind is going to grow a crop that no one will buy," says Melchett International and European Union organic standards rule out any GM contamination of organic food. The Soil Association and the Government's official advisors believe that the Government is overseeing GM trials in the UK that run a real risk of compromising the integrity of organic food.

"The Government must have the guts to chose between a future for organic food and farming or the commercial growing of GM crops," says Melchett.

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Genetic Engineering and the Intrinsic Value and Integrity of Animals and Plants

is the title of a workshop carried by the International Forum for Genetic Engineering (Ifgene). The workshop starts on Wednesday, 18th and lasts to Saturday 21st September 2002 and takes place in the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh. For further information see Ifgene Web Site:

<http://www.anth.org/ifgene/>

By [Klaus-Peter Wilbois](#)

Switzerland: New Treatment for disinfection of carrot seed

In the federal research station for fruit, vegetables and wine, Wädenswil, an effective and at the same time unproblematic treatment against alternaria fungi, the most important causes of carrot diseases, was found: lactic acid for disinfection of carrot seed. By closely looking at the regular pattern in affected carrot fields, experts from the research station concluded that the fungi must be seed borne to a large extent. The hypothesis was confirmed: A high proportion of the carrot seed is contaminated with alternaria fungi on the surface as well as inside the seed coat. Disinfection has to penetrate as deep as possible into the seed in order to be effective enough. However, it must not disturb sprouting ability of the seed. These requirements are met with concentrated lactic acid. According to the Swiss regulation on organic agriculture, lactic acid is allowed as food additive and therefore unproblematic for all users. The laboratory in Wädenswil reached about 90% effectiveness with the treatment. Researchers are now working at optimising the treatment and testing it for other vegetables and their specific contaminations.

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Translation by [Christine Arncken](#)