

Pre-announcement 1st World Organic Seed Conference 2004

The International Federation for Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) together with the International Seed Federation (ISF) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) are preparing the 1st World Organic Seed Conference. The conference will be held in Rome in July 2004. ECO-PB is one of the supporting organisations and is involved in the Program Committee by Edith Lammerts van Bueren. The exact dates, preliminary program and call for contributions will be sent out beginning of October 2003. There will be more information in the next issue of the ECO-PB newsletter.

ECO-PB in the next meeting Steering Committee of the European Cooperative Programme for Crop Genetic Resources Networks (ECP/GR)

Edith Lammerts van Bueren, chair of ECO-PB, has been invited to represent ECO-PB as an observer and to give a presentation in the next meeting of the Steering Committee of the European Cooperative Programme for Crop Genetic Resources Networks (ECP/GR) in Turkey 22 - 25 October 2003. For the organic sector it is a interesting moment to be involved because many European programmes for crop genetic resources want to focus more on in-situ/on-farm conservation and not only on ex-situ conservation.

For more information: www.ecpgr.cgiar.org

Developing the Dutch National Annex 2004

On request of the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture the Louis Bolk Institute is involved in a project lead by Expertise centre LNV to prepare a Dutch, national list of species for which no authorisations will be given for the coming season. The main objective of the approach is to get as many species as possible on a "2004 National Annex" using explicit, well thought out criteria and consultation of expert crop groups. The expert groups will consist of 3 groups: users (producers, lobby groups, research, advisors), suppliers (seed companies) and certifiers (Ministry and certifying/inspection bodies). There will be 4 expert groups dealing with the following: potatoes, cereals, fodder crops/green manures/grasses and vegetables (divided into protected and outdoor arable/horticultural crops). The expert group meetings are planned in October on the basis of the information from seed companies on availability in coming season of organic propagated varieties.

More information: [Edith Lammerts van Bueren](#)

ECO-PB workshop on Criteria and (Sub)crops for national annex's in December 2003

As a follow-up workshop of the ECO-PB workshop in Frankfurt, April 2003 on the organic seed regime 2004 (http://www.eco-pb.org/09/report_workshop03.pdf), ECO-PB is planning a next workshop in December 2003 to compare and discuss the various results of activities in several countries on preparing the so-called national annex (a national list of species for which no authorisations will given for the coming season). Like in the Frankfurt meeting two representatives per country will be invited: one of the art. 14 committee delegates and one on behalf of the organic sector/umbrella organisations. The workshop is scheduled for 8 – 9 December to be held in Bruxelles.

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European Union member states show growing interest in the OrganicXseeds database

Advantages of a common database: Since end of May we know the content of the European Union's new organic seed regulation. One of the core issues of the new regulation is the proof of availability via an online database. This database can be managed by private organisations and can either be based on a national or an international level.

OrganicXseeds.com has been operating for three years as a platform for organic seed trade. We try now to position our database as "the official" one. Several countries showed interest in cooperation with organicXseeds, amongst them Switzerland, United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium and others. A common database would have many advantages:

- for international suppliers: registration of the seed offer only once necessary
- cost sharing and cost saving for programming and registration
- comparable data for the national, annual reports

New programming: We give organicXseeds a totally new structure in order to render better services to all stakeholders (farmers, seed suppliers, authorities and control bodies).

Farmers get the possibility to collect several searches in a basket and to download a bulk confirmation for all searches. Upon wish, the searches will be stored and can be reused for a later search. This makes the use of the database much easier, especially for farms that grow many different species (like many vegetable planters).

Seed suppliers don't have to enter all the information about their actual seed offer themselves. The breeders or central distributors take the responsibility for the first entry of a variety and for correct variety descriptions. Retailers then get the opportunity to choose their offer out of the given range of varieties.

Authorities will get space to publish the respective national lists of species with general derogation etc. They take responsibility for links to derogation forms, important addresses and more. The database-users will first drop on the national, legally binding offer.

Control bodies will get limited access to the database and will have the possibility to verify downloads of a previous date. This renders the downloaded availability confirmation quite safe from forgery.

We hope with all these ameliorations the database will be attractive for all stakeholders and we will faster evolve to a common solution for the whole European Union.

By Andreas Thommen

Germany: Seminar and information exchange between Organic plant breeding and Trade and Retail business

"Something has to happen; we cannot wait until Biotechnology in plant breeding totally dominates Organic farming". This was the conclusion of all sixteen participants of this four-hour-long event. Representatives from organic food / health food shops met at the end of March to inform themselves about seed production and plant breeding, hosted by the regional distributor Chiemgauer Naturkost.

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“It is important that the partners involved in wholesale, trade and consumers, and not only the plant breeders become aware of the problems in plant breeding and seed production” said Fritz Huber from Chiemgauer Naturkost. This was the reason why he invited customers, Demeter producers and plant breeder Julian Jacobs of Obergrashof near Munich along with Gebhard Rossmannith and Petra Boie of Bingerheimer Saatgut, Organic Seeds.

Need to be informed: During the meeting it became soon apparent that there was a need for more information on this complex subject of plant breeding, and it was perceived that this lack of information was partly due to the role multinational companies play in this context.

“It is amazing what has to happen before a seed is put in the ground,” said one of the participants. When at last the carrot is in a box for sale in a shop few think about it”

Hybrid varieties: a way in for GM technology in the near future? The presentation focussed especially on Hybrid varieties, also dominating in the organic market, which are increasingly created using technologies similar to GM modification. Little is done to guard against this easy way in for GM technology said Petra Boie. Besides this problem Gebhard Rossmannith highlighted the question of the nutritional quality of food produced from these seeds.

Tests at the Research institute for Vitality quality (Forschungsinstitut für Vitalqualität Switzerland, fiv) have shown that there are quality differences between Hybrid varieties and non-hybrid varieties. Non-hybrid varieties proved to be higher in vitality, better ripening and higher in dry matter content. They were found to be more “true to type.” In the end the consumers have to be able to tell the difference”, said Julian Jacobs and served taste samples from his own garden.

From knowledge to practical application: As a first step to inform the consumers, the next harvest from the carrot variety Hilmar will be marketed as a special high quality carrot grown from Demeter seed, by regional distributor Chiemgauer Naturkosthandel and Ökoring Handels GmbH. As a special mark of quality the price will be marked up and an information leaflet is available to the consumers. All participating health food shops and distributors supported and would like to participate in further development of Organic seeds and plant breeding.

Further informative meetings, by Phonix, Pax na, Rinklin and the Bioakademie in cooperation with Bingerheimer Saatgut AG and Kultursaat e.V., have shown a large need for a working together of growers and trade on the question of plant breeding and seed production.

By Petra Boie, www.Kultursaat.com, further information on the above mentioned initiative: Chiemgauer Naturkosthandel, phone +49-8638-9877-22; Ökoring Handels GmbH, phone +49-8145-9308-30 or by Bingerheimer Saatgut AG: phone +49-6035-1899-12

Switzerland: Variety-Teams – An Initiative To Promote Ecological Apple Varieties

Increasingly supermarkets sell organic fruit, in particular apples. This development is on one hand a very positive for the organic apple growers. On the other hand, compared to the situation with traditional health food shops, it is almost impossible to sell fruit with some cosmetic defaults such as e.g. small scab spots in supermarkets. To overcome this difficulty, scab resistant varieties seem to be the most elegant solution. However, in super or hyper markets it is also very difficult to introduce new or unknown apple varieties. Today, this dilemma is a serious obstacle for the wide spreading of scab resistant apple varieties in the (organic) apple production although these varieties would lead to remarkable ecological and economic advantages. Also under the aspect of credibility it is not a desirable situation that organic apple growers continue to plant scab sensitive trend-varieties.

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A successful tool to ease the market introduction of scab resistant varieties in supermarkets, the so-called Taste Group Concept (TGC), has been developed in Switzerland already in 1995. Beside information on the variety name the TGC is providing to the buyers also information on the taste direction of the fruit (Weibel and Grab, 2000). Today the TGC is successfully introduced for organic *and* conventional fruit in the two dominant supermarket chains of Switzerland (Coop and Migros). The TGC offers significant degrees of freedom to the growers and to the commerce to introduce more easily new apple varieties into the market – but also to withdraw not successful ones. However, the TGC is not meant to serve as a tool neither to promote low quality fruit nor an unnecessarily high diversity of varieties.

To make the best use of the TGC, in the year 2002, a consortium of the supermarket chain Coop-Switzerland, organic apple growers and FiBL experts joined together in a so-called Variety Team. The goal of our Variety Team is to promote scab resistant apple varieties that are i) of high value for an attractive and diverse organic apple assortment throughout the year; ii) that showed good agronomic and fruit quality characteristics in organic testing trials; and iii) that are not promoted already by others like breeders or nurseries etc.

The working protocol of the Variety Team is relatively simple but challenging and consists of the following steps:

1. The Variety Team chooses and decides for a suitable variety. The main criteria are: i) the variety is suited for organic production; ii) seems promising to fill an empty niche in the present apple assortment in terms of taste, colour, size, selling period etc.; iii) shows good agronomic and quality characteristics; iv) is free or the licence holder shows interest to support or even join the Variety Team.
2. 2-4 growers that are members of the Variety Team are growing approx. 1 ha of the Team variety.
3. In the 3rd and the 4th growing year the yield is used to carry out test sellings at Coop.
4. Depending on the result of the test sellings the Variety Team takes a decision on “Stop or Go”.
5. If the decision is “Go”, a specific planting recommendation to other growers will be released. If the answer is “No”, the growers of the start production are free to grub the variety or to sell it (with the help of the TGC) until amortisation is attained.

Obviously, a crucial point for the functioning and success of the Variety Team is the sharing of responsibilities, efforts, financial investments and risks between the team partners. Presently, a distribution key is in discussion but not yet established. The Variety Team is still in its “embryo-stage”, however, it is very encouraging that growers, breeders, supermarkets and variety testers found together and are willing to realize their first project still in the year 2003.

The concept of Variety Teams does and wants to contrast to Variety Clubs in several points:

1. The main goal of the Variety Team is to create an attractive, ecological and well selling apple assortment based on the Taste Group information Concept rather than pushing single varieties in competition to other varieties.
2. The Variety Team (is more or less) independent of the chosen variety. Thus, can always keep an objective distance to it. E.g. if the agronomic or selling experiences with the start plantations are negative, the Variety Team can decide to stop working with this particular variety without losing a lot of money (and tears) and will go ahead with new varieties.

By Franco P. Weibel Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) CH-5070 Frick and Alfred Leder, Coop Schweiz, CH-4133 Pratteln

France: New Study Says Seed Dispersal of Transgenic Material Can Be Unexpectedly High

One of the potential risks associated with the wider release of genetically modified crops and their use in mainstream agriculture is the hybridisation of transgenic plants with their wild relatives. Previous studies on mechanisms for the escape of transgenic material into the wild population has focused on pollen dispersal as the main route, but new work by scientists at the Université de Lille in France to be published in *Proceedings B*, a Royal Society scientific journal, highlights the role of seed dispersal - inadvertently assisted by human activity - in the potential wide scale dispersal of transgenic material with major implications for the siting of transgenic crops.

Sugar beet: "Gene flow and interbreeding from cultivated to wild plant populations has important evolutionary and ecological consequences," says Dr. Jean-François Arnaud of the Laboratoire de Génétique et Evolution des Populations Végétales of Lille University. "This requires detailed investigation to assess the risk of transgene escapes into natural ecosystems." Sugar beets are of particular interest because they are cross compatible with their wild relatives, for example the sea beet, and crop-to-wild gene flow is likely to occur via 'weedy' hybrid plants locally infesting fields.

"In our study we investigated the potential for 'escape' of transgenic material by analysing a set of molecular markers in a population of weed beets within a field crop of commercially grown sugar beet, a natural coastal population of wild sea beet situated over 1.5 km away and a linking 'contact zone' along a river where a possible mixture of wild and weedy beets could exist," says Dr. Arnaud. The experiment was conducted in the Wimereux area near Boulogne in Northern France.

Unexpected result: DNA from samples from plants harvested in the three areas was extracted and purified and individuals genotyped using height molecular markers to establish the extent of gene exchange. There was clear evidence of weedy beets originating from the commercial crop field in the riverside 'contact zone' some 1.5 km away from the field. "Contrary to classical expectations we found that gene flow through pollen was limited," explains Dr. Arnaud. "However we found that weedy beets can act as a crop-to-wild bridge by escaping from commercial beet fields to wild populations via accidental seed flow. Our results highlight the likelihood for transgene escape resulting from seed dispersal events."

Human culprits: Dr. Arnaud believes that the main mechanisms for seed flow in the studied area are human activities. "Accidental transport of seeds within soils carried on motor vehicles, or by other normal agricultural activities is the best explanation," says Dr. Arnaud. "Our findings are consistent with the hypothesis of human-mediated long-distance dispersal." "Once wild and weedy beets have been brought close together by seed dispersal hybridisation can occur by subsequent pollen dispersal," continues Dr. Arnaud.

Two important implications arise from this work. "Firstly it reinforces the agricultural economic issues caused by increased invasiveness of any future transgenic weed beets within the agricultural system - originally highlighted by Benoit Desplanque and colleagues - and secondly it implies that we must be very cautious regarding the location of transgenic commercial sugar beet field," concludes Dr. Arnaud. "If GMO sugar beets are established in regions where populations of the wild form also occur, then gene flow between wild and cultivated relatives is almost inevitable."

Source: The Royal Society media releases, <http://royalsoc.ac.uk/news/>. Further information: Tim Reynolds, phone +44-7711-942974 or +32-2640-3226