

Food Security Through Seed Saving & Exchange

One Year Report



Social **Farms**
& **Gardens**




NECESSITY

About us

Social Farms & Gardens is a UK wide charity supporting communities to farm, garden and grow together.

Our vision and mission

Our vision

People and communities reaching their full potential through nature-based activities as a part of everyday life.

Our mission

To improve the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and the environment through nature-based activities.

Our history

In April 2018, the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens and Care Farming UK merged to form Social Farms & Gardens. The charity combines over 60 years' experience of farming, gardening and growing.

Our 2,600 plus members are unified by one vision – the use of nature-based activities as a catalyst to transform the lives of people and the communities in which they live.

Food Security Through Seed Saving & Exchange

The FSSSE programme has been running for a year now, and over this time has engaged with over thirty community gardens and hundreds of individuals in both the first phase of educational videos and webinars, and the second phase of the Seed Saving programme itself

Following the enthusiastic response of the Social Farms and Gardens membership to the first phase of the FSSSE programme, we decided to trial a seed saving and sharing programme, concentrating on the North-West (Derry, Donegal and Tyrone) but open to community gardens and growing projects across the north of the Island.

In December 2020 we purchased open-pollinated seed of four easy-to-grow annual vegetable varieties (Tomato, Pea, French Bean and Cucumber) from Real Seeds Ltd in Wales, a small family company with a strong record in championing seed saving and local varieties.

The rationale for purchasing these were that

- 1) they produce viable seed in one season
- 2) they are likely to have been grown by participants before, hence some familiarity with their growing needs was likely to exist

3) processing these seeds requires no specialised equipment

Our hope was that through the sowing and growing season on into harvest and beyond, participants would become a self-supporting network of seed growers, interestedly observing and learning from each other’s progress, mistakes, battles and triumphs.

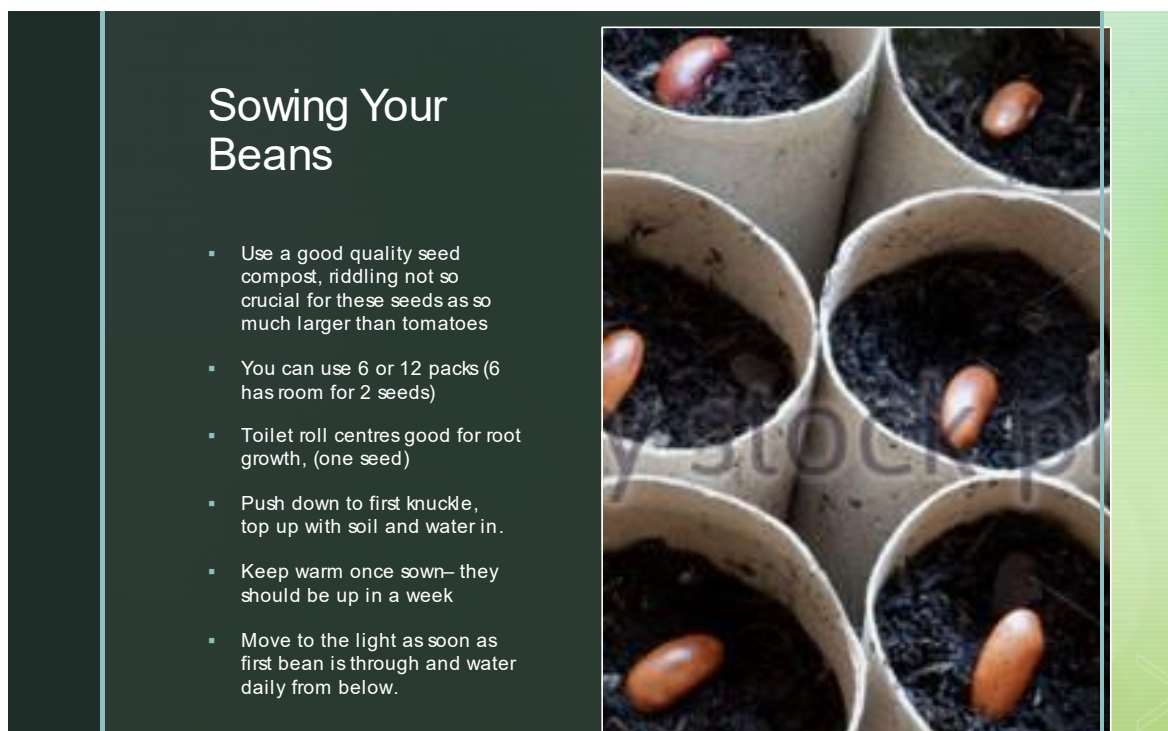
We cannot ignore the impact that the Covid19 pandemic and its attendant lockdowns have had upon the project – although this was minimised by designing a programme that could run from the start almost entirely online. The first real-life meet up was scheduled for mid-August 2021 and this did go ahead as planned. Our final meet-up and seed exchange will be in mid-October to mid-November in Derry, where we can celebrate our success and our learning, exchange seeds with each other, and plan our next steps as a group.

Our call out for participants went out in mid-January, with a start date of Monday the 1st February, a symbolic date of hope and participation - being equally Brigid’s Day, Imbolc and Candlemas.

Meetings

Meetings began on that date with an initial 26 participants and continued at 7pm fortnightly thereafter until May, when we went down to monthly meetings, to facilitate the opening up process, and recognising that the light summer evenings were better suited to getting out and doing work in gardens than sitting in on the computer.

Our initial meetings were structured around the ideals and processes of the project, and instructional videos / Q and A’s about best growing practice, see this example from our French Beans Webinar on 29th March



For April, May and June we featured 3 gardens in each meeting to talk about their progress and what was succeeding for them / what difficulties they were experiencing.

This was a good way for the groups to see their peers, observe their gardens, hear their approach and get a feel for how they approached their growing. Feedback was good from these sessions.

July's meeting took a different format as in order to work through each individuals situation and needs we conducted one-to-one 20 minute sessions over zoom or WhatsApp. These sessions were really helpful, as there was time to go through all the crops and identify what was going well / what could be done better, to offer support and to get feedback out of a group situation.

WhatsApp Group

The WhatsApp group established for the network has been one of the busiest and liveliest groups I have been personally involved with, and has proved to be a great forum for sharing progress, information, disasters, answering queries and keeping motivation high.

It may have been too lively for some groups who found that they were receiving too many alerts; it was a difficult call whether to try and limit the group to strictly Seed Saving business or let the natural energy and good spirits of the group dynamic emerge – in the end we went with a gentle touch, and it has done so successfully, with some members preferring the email contact and info and others engaging regularly on the group; some others do so only when they have a query or something to display, but there is always good encouragement, advice and support from the membership for each others' efforts.

Events

Members of the Network have come together at a number of events that individual gardens have put on over the summer; these included events at Ourganic Gardens in West Donegal, St Columbs Park House in Derry City, Drumnaph Nature Reserve in Co. Derry and Merville Community Garden in Inishowen. Friendships have formed through working together over the year, and these look to be set to continue, as more opportunities for collaboration and connection are being actively sought.

In August we held our first In-Real-Life get together and learning day at True Harvest Seeds, in Kilclief, Co. Down. Debbie Gillies, our host, runs the only Seed Bank on the island of Ireland, and runs a successful CIC saving and selling native wildflower seeds. She also is selling high quality open-pollinated organic veg seeds and is a fount of knowledge and wisdom. The group travelled from near and far and had a wonderful day there on Fri 20th August. Picking Flax seeds together in the field and seeing the whole process of the seed growing, harvesting, cleaning, selection and storage made for a great experience for one and all.



Achievements So Far

The aim of this project was not solely that of producing seed, but of generating community, networking between groups, building friendships, increasing the sense of shared agency and responsibility to help overcome the boundaries imposed by Brexit and Covid. Having said that we are very proud of what our groups have achieved so far.

Our lowest aim was that everybody would be successful in saving at least one variety of seed.

Our achievable aim was that we would have enough seed that everybody who wanted a variety would have enough saved to be able to swap theirs with other members for the varieties they wanted

An additional aim was that we had a reliable source of information on the different varieties – how they tasted, speed of germination, growth, and time to fruiting. This would create a great database for members to choose the variety best suited to their growing situation.

Our numerical goal was that there would be a packet of seed of each variety for each actively participating group, with an excess to be distributed according to the groups decision at the Futures Workshop. This would amount at a maximum to something like 750 tomato seeds, 300 pea seeds, 100 cucumber seeds and 100 French beans.

No final figures are in for the groups, but many groups have in excess of 1500 tomato seeds, 1000 peas and 100's of cucumber seeds. The beans have been slow to mature but we are sure they will get there by the finish date.

Next Steps

We are holding a seed celebration and get together in Derry in the next 8 weeks, on a date to be decided by the network, either Saturday the 16th of October or Saturday 6th November or Saturday 13th November where we hope to bring our Successful Seed Savers together to exchange and


celebrate the achievements of this year, and to talk about how we want to take the network forward.

This could entail linking in further with pre-existing Community seed saving programmes ie that run by Irish Seed Savers Association, which is open to Community Gardens across the island of Ireland.

It could develop in the form of a cross-border Seed Library; participants efforts this year have shown that we can produce a good quantity of seed, and the desire is there to be a transformative force both within our communities and on a wider regional and national level.

We have worked with other organisations promoting Seed Saving including at the Peas Park Belfast Autumn Share Fayre, and a workshop for Derry City and Strabane District Council “I can Grow” participants – this is a 250 household programme. The workshop was for 15 people, but was filmed and an edited video is being produced to be distributed to those unable to attend, along with info sheets.

We intend to produce a small (online or digital) catalogue of the varieties we have saved, with photos and descriptions of what we have saved; this could be the seed (no pun intended) of a future seed library.



Urbikany Tomatoes

- A Russian Determinate Type, Didn't suffer in an unheated glasshouse in the May frosts.
- Seed Sown 15th February
- Pricked Out 17th March
- Potted on 15th April
- First Fruit Ripened 27th June
- Harvested 6th July for Seed
- Still Cropping 23rd September
- Average yield per plant 1 3/4 lb per week
- Average water 10 l per week
- Good Blight Resistance
- Good Splitting Resistance
- Flavour very good, sweet and juicy raw, not too acidic, makes an amazing fried tomato
- Awkward to support and keep lower leaves pruned

We would particularly like to acknowledge the support received from Joanne Butler at Ourganic Gardens, who has been invaluable in her assistance, both in hosting our online events, and in her sharing of her resources and knowledge as an ISSA Seed Guardian. Also Lynne Smith from West Tyrone Gardening Friends for kindly sharing her years of practical experience and advice.



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