

# Afghani Melons

An update from the Afghan Community Seed Bank project shares how growers in North Afghanistan are growing indigenous varieties of melons.

*Rasaq Qadirie*

In August 2013, I travelled to 10 different provinces in the northern region of Afghanistan to take care of the various branches of our Afghan Community Seed Bank project.

I was surprised to see that in contrast to other years, there seemed to be large harvests of several varieties of large, local melons, which I recognized from the 1970s! As I toured the projects, I talked to local people about the food they have been growing in general, and specifically about these kinds of melons. I was fascinated to hear that many of the growers didn't actually own land in the areas where they were cultivating these melons. They usually grew on the land below the mountains, but this year, they realized that they would be able to get access to water from the snow-melt that was coming down from the mountains in their local area. To make use of this, they decided to use their indigenous melon seeds, as their ancestors had done for many generations.

I compared the melons' prices to those of other varieties that had been sold in previous years, and realized that they were very reasonable. I was absolutely overjoyed to see local people from the areas around growing, buying, eating and greatly enjoying these delicious and juicy heritage melon varieties.

There is still much to do to further the important work of preserving and growing (which is, of course, in-situ preservation) the diversity of indigenous seeds in the provinces of North Afghanistan. However, touring the region reminded me of the local communities interest and commitment to this work. This was brought home to me most clearly when a local school teacher said to me, "Bring us those posters about saving our local and indigenous seeds, and we'll post them on the bulletin boards at our schools, so everyone in our communities can see them!"

I was delighted to realize that after 11 years of working on the various aspects of our seeds project, which has included educational initiatives, gardening projects and seed exchanges, we have planted not only indigenous seed, but also hope and inspiration. The local people I spent time with were all very open-minded and eager to use, preserve and protect their local seed varieties. Conversations with people like the school teacher reminded me, yet once more, of the importance of continuing to work towards our project's goals. Our work not only encourages preserving and growing the indigenous seeds of the provinces of North Afghanistan, but through its educational component, also facilitates the exchange of seed and knowledge within the local communities.





## The Afghan Community Seed Bank

Afghanistan is naturally one of the most ecologically diverse countries in the world, with a vast variation of fruits, vegetables and herbs. Many of the 'exotic' fruits and vegetables you see in North America and Europe today have been imported from Afghanistan over the past 200 years – pomegranates, cherries, apricots, grapes and pears. However, this diversity is rapidly depleting. In 1928 there were over 100 strains of wheat. Today there are less than 30. In the Western province of Herat there were once over 100 types of grapes. Today it is difficult to find a dozen.

Prior to 1978 and the civil war, Afghans were known for their good health and good teeth. The war destroyed the balance of economy, agriculture, infrastructure, and social services. Left in desolate conditions, Afghans have been betrayed by failing water management, education system, and the eradication of tradition, import and export practices, and a negative international stigma.

An important issue that needs to be addressed in Afghanistan is the re-introduction of the traditional growing technique *lalmi* (rain-fed agriculture in dry areas) and the use of heritage seeds. While Afghanistan is an agricultural country, it imports over 90% of its seeds, mainly from Pakistan, China, and Turkmenistan. This erodes seed diversity and traditional cultivation practices. In addition, heritage seeds in Afghanistan – those that have been used for thousands of years – have a naturally built-up resistance to disease and have adjusted to the climate and soil, thus making them vital to farmers and the environment. Their cultivation requires only rainwater, and pesticides have

never been used. These traditional seeds and methods produce wonderful products – wheat, tomatoes and carrots, to name just a few.



The damage done to agriculture and education are correlated and extremely detrimental. With millions of educated Afghans leaving since the onset of the war, and the destruction of the education system, illiteracy has become a major issue, even in regards to food production. Traditionally, knowledge has been passed down orally through the generations, but today without written record, it is being lost. Although farmers have outstanding knowledge of technique, soil and climate, the majority are illiterate. The need for a democratically elected government is vital for the much needed improvement of the education system.

The Afghan Community Seed Bank Project was set up in 2006 to respond to some of these issues. Over the years, Rasaq has provided updates about the project in various issues of the *Seeds of Diversity* magazine. ♣



For more information on the Afghan Community Seed Bank Project, visit [www.theafghanseeds.org](http://www.theafghanseeds.org).

Read about Rasaq's original plans to start the seed bank, and an article about the need to preserve traditional Afghani crops by Lisa Kadonaga in *Seeds of Diversity's* Autumn 2006 issue (19.3). Previous updates about the project are in issues 21.1, 22.2, 23.1 and 25.2.

*Rasaq Qadirie is a geologist and soil scientist from Afghanistan. He began the seed bank project in Afghanistan in 2006.*