ForeWord Reviews

ECOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

The Seed Underground: A Growing Revolution to Save Food

Janisse Ray
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At the center of most of the world's most enduring epics, myths, and legends are spellbinding tales of plants that offer immortality, grasses and flowers that offer sustenance for humans and other animals, fruit that contains the knowledge of good and evil, and seeds that when sown across a barren land flower into apple trees. As environmental activist and poet Ray reminds us in her own mesmerizing tale, the history of civilization is the history of seeds, and she fiercely and lovingly gathers the stories of individuals committed to saving seeds, not only to preserve the legacy of certain plants but also to ensure plant biodiversity in an agricultural environment where large corporations encourage monoculture.

As a young child, Ray delightfully learned the value of saving seeds, watching the stunning plants that grew from those she sowed. She warmly recalls her grandmother giving her some Jack bean seeds one summer, and from that moment "I got crazy about seeds because I was crazy about plants because long ago I realized that the safest place I could be was in the plant kingdom—where things made sense … where nothing was going to eat you." Throughout high school—when other girls were dating or playing sports—Ray was ordering seeds, planting, watching, and exhorting them to grow.

Because of her love of seeds and her practices of saving and planting them to keep crops alive for future generations, Ray discovers organizations and scores of other individuals devoted to saving our food in the same way. With her typically forceful passion, Ray points to the ways in which the system is broken: our food is going extinct (by 2005, 75 percent of the world's garden vegetables had been lost), and it is hazardous to our health, harming the earth, annihilating pollinators, and nutritionally impotent.

Ray tells the stories of these many men and women making a difference in their own corners of America, such as Will Bonsall, a "Noah" who's juggling several hundred varieties of potatoes, peas, and radishes as he saves their seeds, or Sylvia Davatz, who is trying to develop a supply of locally grown seeds as the underpinning of a regional food supply. Encouraged by the overwhelming commitment to the seed revolution, Ray fervently proclaims that we can protect

what's left of our seeds and in our revolutionary gardens, develop the heirlooms of the future. She urges us to begin now.

Never content simply to weave charming and compelling stories, Janisse Ray offers a long list of what each of us can do—eat real food, buy organic, grow a garden, try to grow as much food as you consume, save your own seeds—to develop a sustainable lifestyle that fosters biodiversity and a richer and more fruitful relationship between humans and nature. Ray provides a helpful list of organizations and resources to help her readers get started.

Henry Carrigan