



**WILL BONSAI** HAS DEVOTED MUCH OF HIS  
LIFE TO SAVING SOME OF THE WORLD'S  
RAREST HEIRLOOM VEGETABLE SEEDS. BUT  
WILL HIS EFFORTS FALL AMONG THE THORNS?

# The Parable of

By Laura Poppick | Photographed by Greta Rybus



## the Sower





When Will Bonsall was growing up in Waterville in the 1950s and '60s, his family lived modestly, and their grocery budgets were often tight. His folks weren't much for gardening, and what fresh produce they brought home was rationed among him and his two brothers. His grandparents, however, lived on a small farm in nearby Belgrade, and whenever he and his family visited, the stockpiles of homegrown sweet corn and juicy beefsteak tomatoes seemed endless. There was no need to negotiate shares with his brothers. "To me," Bonsall says, "that was the epitome of rich, gracious living."

Today, Bonsall lives on a dirt road in Industry, in the western Maine foothills, in a farmhouse atop a terraced slope covered with apple trees and overlooking lush gardens. When I first visited him there, last May, the 70-year-old homesteader and author welcomed me warmly into his kitchen, sat

me by his woodstove, and launched into a chitchatty, meandering discourse on potato scab, plant sex, and his dream of winning a MacArthur "genius grant." Bonsall is a talker, and it was more than an hour before he offered to show me the space I had come to see, a second-floor room that he calls his office. "It's a godawful mess," he warned.

Bonsall led me upstairs, his white ponytail swinging behind him, and into a small room filled with boxes and bags overflowing with dried plant stalks and stems. "Some of the mess is mice," he said, looking at the floor. Dusty sunlight fell through a window onto a wall of shelves, each one lined with rows of wooden cases the size of shoeboxes. Inside the cases were envelopes, many of them brown with age, and inside the envelopes were seeds — tens of thousands of them, the core of what was once among the country's most prolific private seed collections.

On the top shelf, Bonsall said, were more than 1,100 varieties of peas. On the rows below were barley, beans, carrots, cucumbers, melons, squash,

Will Bonsall calls his homestead in Industry Khadighar Farm. The name comes from Hindi words that translate roughly to "handmade home." Right: Bonsall's bean collection includes varieties like these Jimenez beans, from Mexico. He stores his seeds in labeled paper envelopes.



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sunflowers, and more. At one time, Bonsall told me, he had what he believed to be the world's most diverse collection of rutabaga seeds, along with the second-largest assemblage of Jerusalem artichoke varieties and world-class caches of radishes and leeks. He has donated specimens from his collection to researchers at the USDA-administered National Plant Germplasm System, sold them to seed companies like Fedco, and distributed them worldwide through print and online platforms, some of which he's been instrumental in launching. His work, which he calls the Scatterseed Project, has been covered in multiple books and one Emmy-nominated PBS documentary, and it's earned him something like icon status within the seed-saving subculture.

But these days his collection is dwindling. In part for lack of funding and staff, Bonsall hasn't kept up with the cycle of replanting needed to regenerate new seeds. And he isn't getting any younger. "I'm losing stuff right and left," he said. "I'm in danger of losing everything. And time is of the essence."

...

Humans have been collecting and saving seeds for at least 12,000 years, cultivating progenitors of the crops we find on shelves today. In 19th-century America, homesteaders commonly saved and traded varieties with neighbors, developing collections genetically distinct from folks farther down the road. But as American life has become more urban, far fewer small farmers are maintaining their own seed collections. Many farmers today purchase seeds from large companies more interested in maximizing yields, crop uniformity, and profits than in preserving crop diversity. Those companies have long catered to large-scale monoculture farmers, selling patented hybrid seeds that must be repurchased year after year. Corporate consolidation has led to very few companies selling most of the world's seeds, many of which are genetically modified to resist the pesticides those same companies manufacture. The industrial model has little place for grandma's favorite heirloom lima beans.

That's a problem, and not just because those lima beans may have been delicious. They may also have possessed abilities to withstand extreme drought, wider temperature ranges, rare diseases, or any number of other challenges today's farmers increasingly face. Losing seed diversity means eroding our crops' ability to withstand future change, says Gary Kinard, research leader of the USDA's National Germplasm Resources Laboratory.

"Even if we don't know if there is immediate use for [a seed]," he says, "there is certainly value as an insurance policy to conserve the material."

Recognition of this value has led to modern-day

seed banks. The world's largest and most renowned is the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, opened in 2008 inside a mountain on the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard. Colloquially known as the Doomsday Vault, the \$9 million building contains more than a million seeds stored in cold chambers within the permafrost (as the cold helps prolong a seed's viability, or ability to germinate). This country's largest independent seed bank is managed by the Seed Savers Exchange, an organization founded by a pair of Missouri gardeners in 1975 to facilitate heirloom-seed swaps among growers. The organization today safeguards more than 20,000 rare and heirloom plant varieties in a cold vault in Iowa. Many of the Exchange's 13,000 members are seed savers

Below: Bonsall inspects his corn plot, where he is raising Baxter sweet corn, a variety grown for Maine's canned-corn industry in the 19th century. Facing page, top left: Bonsall trampling grains to dehull them. Middle left: apprentice Desiree Marzan. Bottom center: admiring the fruit of a hazelnut tree.

Since he launched the Scatterseed Project, Bonsall estimates he's shared seeds with tens of thousands of people.





themselves, sharing and swapping via a print and online catalog, though most only dabble in seed-saving as a side project to farming or gardening — few private seed savers maintain collections as vast and varied as Bonsall's was at its peak.

Of course, Bonsall's office is no climate-controlled vault, and he himself is a world-class dabbler. In college, at UMaine in Orono, he switched majors every year, from forestry and wildlife to modern language to education to anthropology. After he graduated, in 1971, he bought 37 acres in Industry and started building the kind of self-reliant life he'd envisioned for himself ever since those childhood visits to Belgrade. He and his now-wife, Molly Thorkildsen, started growing their own food and, over the course of a decade, built their house.

Over the years, Bonsall has had a variety of side hustles: draftsman, prospector, grave-digger. He's a painter and a writer, currently working on a follow-up to a sci-fi novel about a cashless, agrarian utopia that he self-published in 2010. His 2015 book, *Will Bonsall's Essential Guide to Radical, Self-Reliant Gardening*, is a combination of a how-to and a chatty manifesto on his anti-consumerist lifestyle. It's sold 10,000 copies and earns him occasional speaking engagements across the Northeast.

"I'm all kinds of things, a little bit," Bonsall says. "My specialty is not specializing."

It isn't that Bonsall is unfocused so much that he's nonlinear. When I ask a question about his work, it sometimes takes him a half-hour of digressions and detours before he circles around to answer it — but he always does, in rich detail. And he is candid about the shortcomings of his seed-saving operation, pointing out for example, that his seeds would last much longer if he didn't keep them at room temperature. It's just that the six or eight chest freezers he'd need to store his stash would put too much strain on his energy bill, he says.

Whereas other seed savers might concentrate on specific crops, on what grows best in their regions, or on species that exhibit certain characteristics, Bonsall seems to value rarity and diversity for their own sakes. Among his alphabetized envelopes are plenty of heirloom seeds that no one is particularly clambering to plant, but Bonsall compares his collection to a library — he doesn't get rid of something just because no one has checked it out in a while. Here and there, he suspects he has some varieties that only a handful people worldwide still possess — a rare beet, for instance, once grown by gardeners in a region of Bosnia decimated by war and genocide in the '90s.

Unlike the Doomsday Vault and other institutional collections, Bonsall's Scatterseed Project aims to actually scatter his seeds. In the old days, he did

this by publishing lists of his varieties in directories printed by groups like the Seed Savers Exchange. These days, he fills requests that come through various online platforms. He's long been a presence at ag fairs and grange-hall meetings, where other growers can pick his brain and sometimes rifle through his inventory. Since he launched the Scatterseed Project in 1981, Bonsall estimates he's shared seeds with tens of thousands of people.

"It's extraordinary," says Albie Barden, a fellow seed saver in Norridgewock, who focuses on heirloom corn. Bonsall, he says, is a "living treasure." Twenty years ago, Barden approached him for a few kernels of flint corn once widely cultivated by Native people in New England. Bonsall sent a packet of a variety called Byron,

"Genetic diversity is the hedge between us and global famine," Bonsall told filmmakers behind the Emmy-nominated 2016 documentary *Seed: The Untold Story*. "I see myself as Noah, not God."

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which he'd collected years before from an elderly Wilton resident with a few ears stored in a shoebox. Barden and others have since found the variety to be reliable, disease resistant, and delicious. Now, it's beginning to catch on among small-scale farmers, Barden says, and has great potential to become a more widespread crop. If not for Bonsall, the lineage might have died out in a shoebox.

"He was the thread that kept that seed alive," Barden says.

Bonsall's dispersal efforts have been so prolific that he often finds himself chasing his own tail. He'll receive what he's told is a rare variety of such-and-such, but in trying to trace it back to its original source, he'll find it came from someone who got it from someone who got it from an old hippie in western Maine.

"Again and again," Bonsall says, "I'll discover something that originally came from me."

...

The next time I visited Bonsall, in August, he sat me down in his kitchen and offered me a taste of yacón, a root crop native to Peru that looks like a skinny sweet potato and grows well in Maine. A vegan since the '70s, Bonsall has a pantry filled with arcane produce. He took a yacón out of a bag, peeled off the skin, and broke me off a piece. It was delicious, like a cross between a pear and a water chestnut. He wishes more Mainers would start growing and eating it, he said. Between crunches,

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I asked why. Bonsall furrowed his brow and smirked.

“You just tasted some, didn’t you?” he asked. “What kind of question is that?”

Yacóns are one of the hundreds of heirloom crops that Bonsall might plant in a summer. In the months since my first visit, he’d been busy prepping beds, sowing fields, and turning compost, and as the summer reached its apex, the demands of farm and homestead had him out straight.

“My job is to keep 5,000 balls in the air,” he told me. “I fail, and I fail often. Fortunately, most of the balls I’ve been dropping I can pick up again.”

Bonsall used to hire as many as six seasonal workers to help run his farm, including a half-acre he devoted entirely to the Scatterseed Project. The veggies he

Network, an online seed-distribution effort that Bonsall helped found as an alternative to the Seed Savers Exchange. With fewer young people farming or gardening, she says, the average age of seed savers across the country is climbing — and seed varieties exclusively in the hands of older people are at greater risk of being lost.

“He’s a good case in point of why this work is needed,” Hollowell says. “Will is physically not able to keep up with what he was able to do years ago.”

Bonsall acknowledges as much, and his desire to share his knowledge with younger generations is part of why he stays on the lecture and workshop circuit, even though such gigs often nudge him well out of his rural element. (A recent trip to Rhode Island found him sleeping

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mostly ate or preserved for the offseason, and the seeds he collected and dried to replenish his stocks. He paid his staff out of earnings from the Seed Savers Exchange, which for years paid Bonsall to grow seeds to back up their vast collection in Iowa. Then, about seven years ago, the organization disbanded this network of paid growers.

Without the income, Bonsall has hired less help, and he struggles these days to keep up with the replanting needed to replace his seeds before they become unviable — which, depending on storage conditions, can happen after just a few years. His collection, once 5,000 varieties strong, has atrophied to just a few hundred that he’s confident are still viable, most of them potatoes. At his collection’s peak, Bonsall had more than 700 potato varieties. Now, he’s down to a couple hundred.

So he has resolved to do more work on his own. Thorkildsen, his wife, sometimes works on the farm alongside him, but she also works at a health-food store in Farmington. Bonsall, spry as he is, turns 71 this summer, and there are limits to how much he can accomplish.

It’s a problem that isn’t limited to the Scatterseed Project, says Irena Hollowell, board president of the Grassroots Seed

on a “gourmet mattress” surrounded by gold-plated fixtures. “It was just bizarre,” he says. “Little Billy from the Woods here — I didn’t feel comfortable.”) Speaking engagements also sometimes result in donations to the Scatterseed Project.


When he can afford to pay a stipend, Bonsall brings on an apprentice to sow seeds and maintain beds. His apprentice for the last two summers, 32-year-old Desiree Marzan, says she came to Industry from her home in New York City more interested in organic farming generally than in seed saving specifically. That changed during her first summer, when Bonsall brought her along to a workshop at Vermont’s Sterling College, where he was presenting on day two of a weeklong course.

“He talked about squash sex, he talked about tomatoes, he talked about a whole variety of things,” Marzan remembers. When he was done, she found herself engrossed in the rest of the workshop. She ended up staying the whole week, graduating with a diploma from seed school.

Marzan hopes to see more of her millennial peers getting back on the land and saving seeds, helping to prepare for climate change and making the farming community more resilient. “It would be really helpful, and really healthful, to

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know that if I lose something, I can go to my neighbor and know that they have it," she says.

Marzan was harvesting blueberries behind the house as Bonsall took me for a walk around his fields. He showed me a row of squat, yellow cucumbers called Boothby's Blonde, a little-known variety grown on a family farm in Livermore for five or more generations. Bonsall's parents met the Boothbys on a camping trip in the '80s and mentioned their son was interested in heirloom seeds. The Boothbys offered some, Bonsall found the cukes delicious, and he later shared them with a few seed companies. Today, Boothby's Blonde is available in seed catalogs across the U.S. and abroad.

When we came to a field filled with dozens of varieties of tomatoes, Bonsall got down on his knees and started cleaning up the beds. "I like weeding. I like to fantasize," he said, his long beard hovering above the dirt. "It's a great time for me to go to la-la land."

He'd sown the field late in the season but was pleasantly surprised to see the plants already flowering, looking like they'd bear fruit and new seed. A single tomato can produce anywhere from 50 to 200 seeds — plenty to restock his supply for another few years.

He plans to continue this way indefinitely, drying and storing seed in his office, making them available through his various outlets. In the event of the occasional windfall donation, he'll hire more help. Recently, someone donated a windmill, which Bonsall says might power a few storage freezers, if he finds time to put it together. As time allows, he'll keep replanting his varieties, and with help from those he's supplied, he'll track down fresher samples of varieties he's lost. If he can't keep up with it all, then his collection will continue to age and his seeds to expire. But as long as he's able to crawl barefoot in the garden, he'll keep on juggling, keep on doing what he loves.

"Right now, I'm having fun," Bonsall said, making his way down the tomato aisle on all fours. He looked up at me, with my notebook in hand, and grinned. "You're hard at work," he said. "I'm playing." ■

Laura Poppick is a freelance science and environmental journalist based in Portland. Her stories have appeared in *Smithsonian*, *Scientific American*, *Audubon*, and elsewhere.

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