Seed Catalogs Examined, Crop Varieties Explained
TC Metro Growers Network 2020 Kickoff, March 7th

A lively group of Networker’s attended the Digging into Seed Catalogs, Demystifying Crop Varieties event at Common Roots Cafe. Karl Hakanson, Ag. and Natural resource Educator, UM Extension-Hennepin County, and TCMG Network Coordinator, welcomed the group and started things off with a review of what this Network is all about … wait for it … networking!

A variety of growers attended, including urban farmers, seed librarians and community and backyard gardeners, who shared their practices and experiences. Hakanson started the conversation by handing out a list of horticultural terms to help growers make sense of the sometimes over technical descriptions used by scientists and professional horticulturists when discussing crops and growing techniques (available here: www.sfa-mn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Hort-Defs.pdf).

Paging through the colorful catalogs the group reviewed terms like heirloom varieties, open-pollinated, variety, hybrid, hardiness or growing zones and various descriptions of disease tolerance. With so many to choose from, how can these descriptions help you decide which varieties to grow?

Natalie Hoidal, U of MN Extension Horticulture and Food Systems Educator brought along a box of 2020 seed catalogs. Looking at all the different varieties and descriptions the group had a lively discussion about the all the information that can be gleaned from seed catalogs. Hoidal offered tips on what to look for when trying to decide on which crop varieties are right for your situation. She reviewed some of the terminology used to describe crop characteristics, and some of the differences among some seed catalogs in the quality and usefulness of the information provided.

Connie Carlson, Statewide Co-Director, Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems, U of MN RSDP, and President of the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota, was in attendance and provided additional insight into seed licensing and sources for locally adapted seeds. She specifically highlighted the newly launched, North Circle Seeds, a company operated by SFA board member, Zach Paige. Connie also brought pollinator mix seed packets from Minnesota Native Landscapes for Networkers to take home.

Attendees also traded information about how to find fruit tree owners in the city who need people to pick (and keep) their fruit. We also discussed some of the issues around seed patents, cover crops in the vegetable garden, and determining the viability of and using saved seeds.

As I send this out, the Corvid-19 pandemic is disrupting … everything. Stay safe and stay connected! --KH