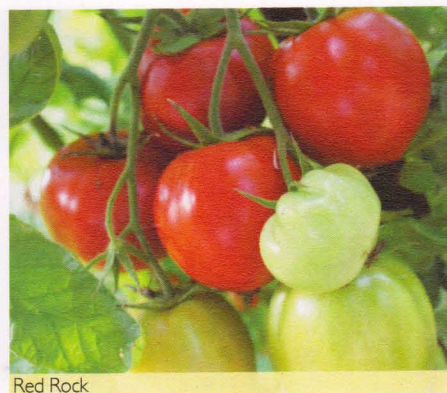




Blushing Bride



Oscar's Oxheart

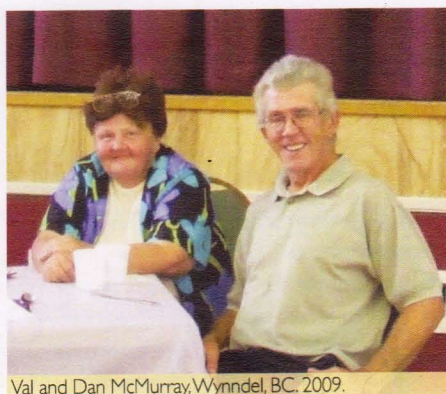


Red Rock

A Legacy of Seeds



Joie de la Table

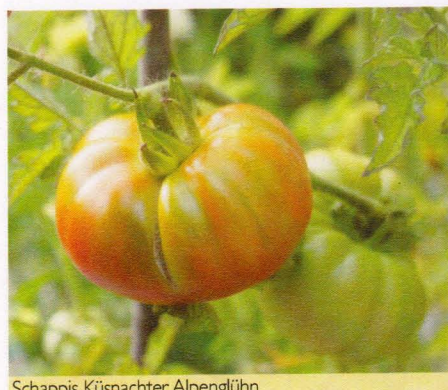


Val and Dan McMurray, Wynndel, BC, 2009.



KBX

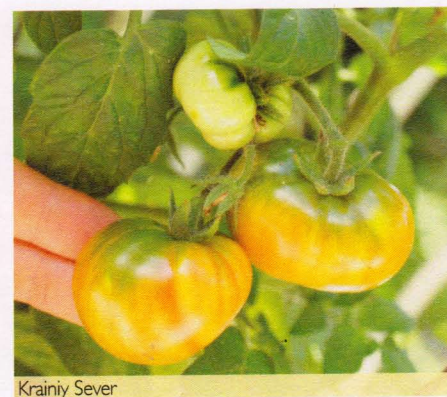
The Dan McMurray Community Seed Bank at the College of the Rockies in British Columbia is home to the seed collection of two avid seed savers. *Kelly Gilliam* tells us their story.



Schappis Küsnachter Alpenglühn



Vince's Own



Krainiy Sever

My first introduction to the McMurrays and their seed collection was at arm's length, when in the winter of 2008, I cracked the next year's Farmer's Almanac and read an article entitled "Tomato Love." The story described Dan and his wife Val's amazing tomato garden, from which they harvested thousands of pounds of fruit every year. As the initiator of a burgeoning seed bank myself, that article catapulted me into something that quickly overtook a good portion of my life – growing out tomatoes and sharing the seeds as widely as I could. I connected with Dan and Val, and was lucky to be able to visit them several times over the years. They were extremely supportive of my seed bank venture, and enthusiastically shared not only their knowledge and seed varieties, but also their support, kindness, and sheer excitement for these seeds. Their passion and commitment to these varieties infected my very being, and set me on a path I could not have predicted.

To say that the McMurrays' collection is invaluable is not hyperbolic, for how do you put a monetary value on rare varieties? More importantly, how do you put that same monetary value on how far their seeds have travelled? This seems an impossible task.

With the passing of Val in 2010 and Dan in 2012, this incredible seed collection needed a new home and a new keeper. A keeper who would not only continue growing out the varieties and saving seeds, but also one who philosophically shared the McMurrays' belief that the varieties and the knowledge that came with them should be shared as widely as possible, with whoever wanted them, for no profit. In the spring of 2012, Dan's second wife found just such a keeper when she donated the seeds to the College of the Rockies Creston campus, where the collection found its new permanent home as the Dan McMurray Community Seed Bank.

When the College of the Rockies received the seeds, they had no small task ahead of them: they needed to find space for a seed collection of 1600 tomatoes, 84 beans, 26 peas, 27 squash, 24 melons, and an assortment of other vegetables. Pat Huet, a retired biologist and past volunteer with other agricultural projects at the college, stepped up to the plate and organized a group of volunteers to go through their new seed acquisitions and sort and catalogue

all the varieties. Today, as Pat and the team come up on their third year as stewards of the seeds, they find they are still learning and growing every year to make the collection a viable and ongoing resource, not only for residents of the Creston Valley in BC, but with hopes to expand their reach far and wide as the McMurrays did.

“We feel that we are merely temporary stewards of the seeds. The object is to get them spread out far enough, and in enough different hands, that they will not disappear.”

Finding a new home for the seeds has been a great step in ensuring their permanent survival as a collection. There are still a few important things, however, that the college has to consider in maintaining the seed bank. “Right now we are focusing on re-growing the seed bank varieties and trying to maintain them, especially for rare varieties,” says Melissa Flint, a permaculture designer and instructor at the college, who also grows out seed stock at the college and maintains the seed bank's infrastructure.

The college works with a group of dedicated growers who help replenish the seeds every year. Add to that the varieties grown in their greenhouse, and that makes approximately 100 varieties getting restocked each year, which is no small feat for a collection of 1800 varieties. But as the seeds age, its becoming more urgent for the collection to be grown out, and this concern is foremost in the minds of the seedbank's stewards. “We are a little concerned that some of the tomato seeds will be 10 years old next season, which means they are getting too old to germinate,” says Huet. “We don't have enough growers to replenish the supply of these varieties.”

While there are challenges currently facing the collection, the volunteers' excitement is palpable. When asked what they have planned for the future, Melissa Flint and

Pat Huet both dream big. “I would like to involve more people in the seed bank and get more growers out there,” says Flint. “It would be great to create a wiki, collaborate with other seed banks, and share and maybe even sell some of the seeds, but we will require some dedicated people for this to happen.”

In order to further share the McMurrays' seeds with the community, the college attends the annual Seedy Saturday in Creston. Dan and Val held an annual tomato tasting and picking at their home, to which they invited friends who wished to partake in their tomato bounty, and it seems as though the college is continuing in the spirit of this tradition.

The seed bank's physical home is currently up for discussion amongst the volunteers, in an effort to ensure the seed stays viable for the maximum amount of time possible. Currently, the seed collection is stored in mouse-proof bins in a shed located at the college, but Huet aims higher. “We have talked about [creating] a physical seed bank – that's something we will be discussing this fall,” she says.

While it is hard to quantify the actual number of people the McMurray's seed conservation and sharing efforts have reached, their impacts have been widely felt across Canada and even in the US. “Some years ago [Dan] sent me tomato seeds. Since that time their offspring have been the production workhorses in my garden,” says Joseph Lofthouse, a farmer and plant breeder located in Utah. “After his death I received other seeds which originated with Dan. They have become the foundation of my landrace tomato breeding program.”

Tatiana Kouchnareva of TatianasTomatobase.com (a seedbank and online database of cultivation notes shared by gardeners) maintains the McMurray's presence on her site, where Dan and Val extensively recorded their yearly observations. Kouchnareva created a memorial list on her site showcasing all the varieties she received from the McMurrays, which now have a home in her seed bank. "I have been exchanging seeds with Dan and Val since 2005," says Kouchnareva on her website. "We talked so much about seed preservation and about gardening in general. I miss them dearly."

Although several seed savers remember Dan and Val, the best way to summarize the McMurrays and their collection may well be in Dan's own words: "We feel that we are merely temporary stewards of the seeds. The object is to get them spread out far enough, and in enough different hands, that they will not disappear. We believe in 'pay it

forward', and if you don't know what that means, google the term. We think the world could use a lot more of it." ■

Kelly Gilliam is a member of Seeds of Diversity's board, as well as the operator of the Populuxe Seed Bank, which grows out and redistributes open pollinated and heirloom seeds. She has been gardening for 15 years, and lives in Edmonton, Alberta.

You can still visit Dan McMurray's website to read his extensive notes and information about his gardening practices at grungysgarden.blogspot.ca.

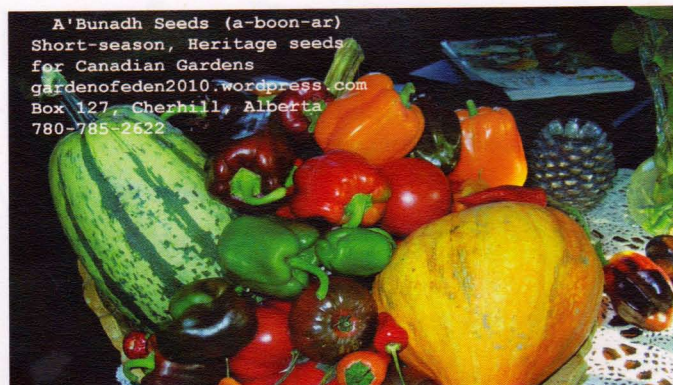
Photo credits: All photographs on page 12 are from Tatiana Kouchnareva's website and seed collection, tatianastomatobase.com. To see Tatiana's memorial list of tomato varieties that came from Dan and Val, and learn more about the varieties shown here, visit tatianastomatobase.com/wiki/Memorial_List_of_McMurrays%27_Varieties.



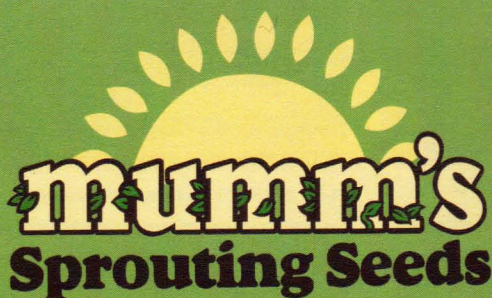
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