

Seedtime and harvest: Nothing is independent

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [September 8, 2009](#) issue

I hold three mottled white-and-burgundy beans in the palm my hand. The beans are named Jacob's Cattle for the "striped, speckled and spotted" goats that Jacob bred to thwart Laban's devious whims in the book of Genesis. The jar of shiny seeds will provide hearty, delicious winter meals. The plumpest of them supply next year's crop.

My husband and I live on an organic farm with Episcopal nuns. After five decades of teaching in the two schools they founded, the Community of the Holy Spirit embraced a prophetic call to respond to the environmental crisis.

The CHS sisters strive to live a life reflecting sustainable living, social justice and spiritual fulfillment. Daily life involves organic farming (maple sugaring, planting, tending, gathering and preserving food), singing the monastic offices, fellowship, eucharistic living, service to others, environmental education and individual artistic pursuits. Of the sisters' many agricultural skills, the most interesting to me is the saving of seeds.

As a lover of flowers, I've planted seeds plenty of times in my life. But I'd never noticed seeds other than as a means to an end. The way we live on the farm requires not only reflecting, discussing and meditating on our daily work, but also awakening to implications of the human endeavor of growing food for survival. We know perfectly well that if our crops fail we can go to the local A&P. But we're trying to understand and empathize with what it is like to be dependent on the land, conscious of land's adversaries and advocates in places beyond suburban New York.

A pack of coyotes massacred two-thirds of our chicken flock while we were singing Easter Vespers. It was not difficult to imagine how devastating the consequences might have been had we not been able to simply order another box of cute baby chicks. But we took time to reflect on how a similar event might affect, say, a rural Ugandan family. When my seed-grown brassicas died in my experimental kitchen

garden, I thoughtlessly drove to Agway for a six-pack of already sprouted cauliflower. But what if all our seeds had failed? Or if we, like many exploited farmers in developing countries, had purchased sterile seeds from global agribusinesses?

I love to think of an ancestor 10,000 years ago, contemplating three beans in her hand, enjoying the pleasant clacking as she shakes them, just as I am doing now. Maybe she's also juggling an infant on her hip and thinking of next season. Perhaps instead of eating these beans, she plants them, hoping to gather more in one place next harvest.

The Japanese natural farmer Masanobu Fukuoka says that the purpose of farming "is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings." I'm aware of a moral shift, a sense of earth farming me. Each seed presents me with a cosmic mystery: the seed falls to the ground to die, the sower sleeps and one day rises to see that transformation and resurrection have taken place in the dark. As Jesus observed, we "know not how."

The nuns witness consciousness in the plants: the desires, preferences and strategies for fruitfulness. "I think the corn is raising us," says one sister. Welcome and unwelcome, seeds scatter miraculously. One plant blooms and sends forth seeds thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. They are gathered in the cheeks of rodents or borne along breezes by downy silk or embedded in the mud beneath my sneaker. Seeds stick to my hair and clothes as I ramble about the farm. Seeds nestle within tempting fruit eaten by the birds, then are digested and dropped along flight paths. Tomatillo scraps fed to the chickens last year yield plants that now flourish uninvited in our yard. As tiny as mustard seeds or as large as peach pits, seeds migrate with beguiling ingenuity.

I took the Jacob's Cattle from a score of stunning and unique shapes, colors and textures of dried beans displayed upon the pantry shelf. We grow many types of beans for variety of taste and as a hedge against crop failure. A pest or blight will attack one variety yet not another. Monoculture farming contributed to the mid-19th-century European potato famine, when 1 million people in Ireland died and another million were forced to emigrate.

The seeds in my hand represent my own awe in the face of Mystery. I know now that I live in paradise. But I also experience a sense of dread. It's that old story about

eating from the wrong tree. As I admire and learn about seeds, I'm aware of the inevitable drama of human greed and short-sightedness playing out like a summer blockbuster disaster movie. The human sin of self-centeredness wreaks violence against nature's intrinsic interdependence. The planet's foundational biodiversity is necessary for the survival of life. Farmers know what mystics know: nothing is independent of anything else.

St. Francis, hoeing his garden, was asked what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow. "Continue hoeing my garden," he said.