

Free the seed: OSSI nurtures growing plants without patent barriers

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(Phys.org) —Members of the Open Source Seed Initiative this week held a rally and seed giveaway event. The group is concerned over restricting access to seeds through patents. They are stirring up public awareness over their mission to model a new crop system of seed-sharing in the spirit of open source software. On Thursday the OSSI group

gathered at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, to give away a set of seeds that can be used by anyone. The seeds are unrestricted by patents or intellectual property barriers. They released 29 new varieties of crops under an "open source pledge" for farmers, gardeners and plant breeders. The new varieties involved broccoli, celery, kale, quinoa and other vegetables and grains released under their novel Pledge, to be printed on all OSSI seed packets.

"It's almost like a haiku," said OSSI co-founder Irwin Goldman, professor and chair, department of horticulture, University of Wisconsin. "It basically says these [seeds](#) are free to use in any way you want. They can't be legally protected. Enjoy them."

The pledge states "By opening this packet, you pledge that you will not restrict others' use of these [seeds](#) and their derivatives by patents, licenses, or any other means. You pledge that if you transfer these seeds or their derivatives they will also be accompanied by this pledge."

By opening the packet, a person in turn carries the commitment to keep the seeds-and any future plant derivatives bred using them-in the [public domain](#). The OSSI had its roots in 2011 by public plant breeders, farmers, NGO staff members and advocates of sustainable food systems. They shared a concern over the reduced availability of [germplasm](#)-seeds-for public plant breeders and farmer-breeders. (Plant germplasm has the genetic information for the plant's hereditary [makeup](#). According to Plant Gene Resources of Canada, germplasm is usually seed, or it can be another plant part—a stem, a leaf, or pollen, or even just a few cells that can be cultured into a whole plant.)

Describing the OSSI, Goldman said "I liken it to a genetic easement. Or, a national [park](#) for seeds."

Joining Goldman in this project is Jack Kloppenburg, professor in the

Department of Community and Environmental Sociology at the University, also calling for non-patented seeds to remain in the public domain.

Kloppenburg said the movement represents a new space where breeders and farmers can share seeds, "And, because it applies to derivatives, it makes for an expanding pool of germplasm that any plant breeder can freely use." He also said that "shared seed can be the foundation of a more sustainable and more just food system."

Goldman said there were economic opportunities. "You can sell these open source seeds just like you'd sell any other seeds."

Future plans include bringing international partners on board. Last year, Kloppenburg wrote a conference paper for a Yale University meeting on food: "Modeled on the legal arrangements successfully deployed by the free and [open source](#) software movement, OSSI hopes that its licenses might undergird the creation of a 'protected commons' populated by farmers and [plant breeders](#) whose materials would be freely available and widely exchanged but would be protected from appropriation by those who would monopolize them." He said while OSSI had its beginnings as a North American initiative, OSSI's ambition was "to catalyze the establishment of allied initiatives among indigenous peoples, in the Global South, and in Europe."

Meanwhile, the OSSI site on Friday announced it was now possible to order the first package of 15 seeds from their online store, with delivery in mid-May. These are packets of OSSI vegetable varieties with such names as Midnight Lightning zucchini, Red Ursa kale, Gatherer's Gold pepper, and Joker Lettuce and more. They said the \$25 fee for the collection goes toward the OSSI fund for Open Source Breeding and to help support farmers and any breeders committed to releasing varieties protected in the public domain.

More information: [www.opensourceseedinitiative.org/
www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/f ... Kloppenburg 2013.pdf](http://www.opensourceseedinitiative.org/www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/f...Kloppenburg_2013.pdf)

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