

New Cornell organic corn available for sale

April 18 2011, By Stacey Shackford



Klaas Martens of Lakeview Organic Grain collaborated with Margaret Smith to expand the seed production of new Cornell organic corn that has recently been licensed and is now available for sale.

It took Cornell breeder Margaret Smith years to perfect her new variety of organic corn but only six weeks to get its seeds licensed and available for sale.

Bred to thrive in Northeast growing conditions, organic farmers across the United States can now plant the hardy hybrid; one of the first licenses was granted to Iowa-based Blue River Hybrids, which distributes organic seeds nationwide.

Until now, the only organic corn seed available was developed and tested primarily in the Midwest, where the soil and climate is much more forgiving than in New York and the Northeast.

Although its name may be unexciting, D2901 has proven to be a great "workhorse" hybrid, according to Smith, professor of [plant breeding](#) and associate director of the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station.

Hybrid seeds are produced by crossing two parent plants. Often these parents are not very robust, which presents a real challenge for organic farmers who don't use chemical herbicides or pesticides to control weeds and disease, Smith said.

The parent plants used to create Smith's variety, however, are hybrids themselves, meaning they are much more vigorous and easy to grow. They are also resistant to many diseases, have bigger seed ears and shade the ground early, which can help control weeds.

Smith, one of only a handful of corn breeders in public research institutions, said it is gratifying to see one of her varieties used by the public. Corn breeding is dominated by the private sector, which employs an estimated 500 breeders in the United States.

Organic corn receives much less industry investment, and Smith sees it as an opportunity for her program to make a big impact. It's one of the reasons she licensed a variety for the first time in her 24 years at Cornell.

A grant from the New York Farm Viability Institute had initially enabled her to expand [seed production](#) from a few pounds in her laboratory to entire fields in Penn Yan, where she worked in collaboration with Klaas and Mary-Howell Martens, M.S. '82, of Lakeview Organic Grain.

To commercialize the seed, licenses were obtained in just six weeks, with help from Jessica Lyga at Cornell Center for Technology Enterprise and Commercialization, to hit the height of the seed-selling season.

Although Smith believes research done at a land-grant university should remain in the public domain rather than be proprietary, the seed was licensed because of the economic reality of diminishing public resources, with breeding programs particularly at risk because they require long-term investment that doesn't fit into the two- to three-year funding windows of short-term grants.

"It's been a struggle to reconcile these inner conflicts, but we do need to find a return on that public investment," Smith said. "It's a reality that has been more and more glaring in the last few years."

Most licenses issued by Cornell for use in the United States are non-exclusive, meaning several commercial entities can license the rights to use and sell the products. They pay a licensing fee and royalties per unit. Lyga said there were 61 Cornell commercial plant licenses issued in 2010.

Joseph Vinciguerra, director of business partnerships and foundation relations for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, said licensing transactions often help cultivate broader public-private relationships.

"These have the capability to result in greater downstream collaboration between our researchers and the business markets," he said.

Provided by Cornell University

Citation: New Cornell organic corn available for sale (2011, April 18) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-04-cornell-corn-sale.html>

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