

Collaboration yields new organic sweet corn variety

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“Who Gets Kissed?,” a new variety of sweet corn for organic farmers, grows in a field. It’s the first variety in a series of organic, open-pollinated sweet corns being developed by UW-Madison researchers and the Organic Seed Alliance. Credit: Organic Seed Alliance

When the time comes for Wisconsin's organic farmers to decide which crops to plant next year, they'll have a tasty new variety of sweet

corn—with a particularly sweet name—among their choices.

The new variety, called "[Who Gets Kissed?](#)," is the first in a series of organic, open-pollinated sweet corns being developed through a [plant-breeding](#) project led by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the [Organic Seed Alliance](#) (OSA). Farmers and professional breeders are also involved.

With yellow and white kernels, Who Gets Kissed? is named in honor of a game played at corn husking bees of old, when communities gathered to husk corn and dance. Corn was much more genetically diverse back then, and when a person found an ear with all red kernels, known as a "pokeberry ear," they could choose one person among the group to kiss.

"Our approach to plant breeding is what sets Who Gets Kissed? apart from other sweet corn varieties in the marketplace," says Micaela Colley, executive director of OSA, a nonprofit involved in the development and stewardship of agricultural seed. "Who Gets Kissed? was not only bred under [organic farming](#) conditions, but [organic farmers](#) were equal partners in the breeding effort."



UW sweet corn breeder Bill Tracy holds an ear of “Who Gets Kissed?” corn.

The story of the new variety's development starts with Minnesota farmer Martin Diffley. Diffley couldn't find an organic sweet corn variety with adequate vigor that tolerated his farm's cool soils. He approached John Navazio, OSA's senior scientist at the time, who put him in touch with UW-Madison sweet corn breeder Bill Tracy, professor and chair of the university's Department of Agronomy. Tracy was already selecting for cool soil emergence in sweet corn, and a collaboration emerged.

After nearly seven years of effort, the project has yielded Who Gets Kissed?, a flavorful variety that yields well, tolerates cool soils and is resistant to common rust and corn smut.

"Most of the sweet corn varieties in the marketplace that demonstrate similar traits are hybrids," says UW-Madison graduate student Adrienne Shelton, a member of Tracy's lab. "Hybrids are developed to be genetically uniform, where the ears are the same color and same size, and they mature at the same time. Who Gets Kissed? has similar traits, but was developed for organic growers who appreciate a more diverse, open-pollinated [sweet corn](#)."

Because the variety is open-pollinated, growers are encouraged to save and select seed from their harvests to adapt the variety to their own local conditions and market needs, she adds.

"Who Gets Kissed? is an example of the amazing results that can be achieved in open-pollinated and collaborative breeding, where the consumer, farmer, breeder, seed grower and all other stakeholders are

involved," says Tom Stearns, founder of High Mowing Organic Seeds. "Innovative varieties with a dynamic process like this connect the dots and foster a deeper engagement in developing the food system of the future."

The new variety is available for purchase through High Mowing Organic Seeds. This project was funded in part by the Organic Farming Research Foundation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative.

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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