



# From Hobby to High Success

## Certified organic seeds

by Marcia Passos Duffy

Dennis Sauer is driving a Massey Ferguson combine harvesting mustard seed in Vermont with help from Heather Jerrett.

**T**om Stearns always loved collecting seeds. As a teenager, he started gathering seeds from his vegetable garden and giving them away to family and friends. He soon realized the commercial potential of the organic tomato and bean seeds he was gathering and turned his hobby into a start-up business by mailing hundreds of advertising flyers all over the country.

“When I first started, I was given some seeds from gardeners and farmers I knew who did seed saving themselves,” said Stearns. “What got me thinking about this as a business is that I knew these varieties were not sold by seed companies, especially not organic seeds. I knew I had a niche because people couldn’t get them anywhere.”

After four years of collecting seeds as a hobby, and another five years of being a full-fledged business, Stearns, now at 30, has his

sights aimed high. His company, High Mowing Seeds, is part of a new generation of organic seed growers and sellers, and was recently named one of the top 21 seed companies in the 2005 Sustainable Honor Roll by *Mother Earth News*.

High Mowing Seeds sells 150 varieties of open-pollinated and 50 varieties of heirloom organic vegetable and flower seeds (available in small packets and bulk) to farmers and home gardeners. Retail customers can purchase seeds through a mail-order catalog, through its seed rack program in garden centers and natural food stores or online; commercial growers can buy direct from the company. Twenty other seed companies buy High Mowing Seeds and repackage them to sell in catalogs (including Turtle Tree Seeds, West Coast Seeds and Southern Exposure Seeds). The company has grown from sales of

\$14,000 in the first year to \$445,000 for 2005. Sales are projected to hit \$800,000 in 2006.

### Small seeds, big plans

While Stearns began small, he said that from the beginning he had large commercial aspirations. “But I took my time. I made sure I was doing everything right. And I’m still trying achieve a balance in my life between this work and other interests,” said Stearns, who is married and has two young daughters.

All of High Mowing’s seeds are raised on organic farms, many of which are located in Vermont. They grow over 25 percent of the 200 varieties of vegetable, herb and flower seed crops themselves. Another 25 percent of seeds are grown in California (Terra Organics at Emerald Farm); the rest are grown by a group of 20 certified organic farmers in



Red Giant mustard green.  
Inset: Tom Stearns, founder of High Mowing Seeds.

Vermont and beyond who grow seed crops for the company.

Not only does High Mowing grow its own seeds for retail catalogs, but it also does its own retail selling, an unusual business model in the seed industry. “Seed companies that people are familiar with, like Burpee, are brokers. They don’t have tractors, farms, seed cleaning equipment. They are a warehouse, they get seed from wholesalers, put it in little packages and sell it,” he said. “We not only have all the farm equipment and all that goes with running a seed farm business, but we also have a catalog, rack programs and do online sales.”

### Responding to the market

The organic seeds that High Mowing grows and sells, said Stearns, are quickly becoming top-of-the-line, and he is determined to give the conventional seed business a run for its money. “Wholesale seed companies don’t pay much attention to organic seeds,” he said. “It’s a blip on the screen for them. It is not a big moneymaker. They think it’s a fad that will go away.”

Another void the company aims to fill is the request for lesser-known strains of vegetables. The problem with the way the seed industry works now, Stearns said, is that seed retailers can’t respond quickly to changes in

demands of the marketplace because the seed wholesalers that supply them won’t grow small quantities. “The scale [of production] is so huge that if a retail seed company hears from its customers a demand for a different variety of, let’s say, radishes, beets, spinach or Swiss chard, there’s a 5,000-pound minimum order by the seed wholesaler.” Unless there is a huge demand, smaller needs from consumers just don’t get fulfilled.

Another problem with large wholesalers is that they don’t address diseases in an organic way, which often results in vegetable farmers buying new varieties of seeds for their resistant properties that often change within a few years. Stearns gives the example of a prevalent problem of spinach resistance to downy mildew. The problem with the wholesale breeding program’s answer to this dilemma (creating races resistant to the disease) is that the downy mildew quickly evolves past a new resistant seed produced, much like resistance to antibiotics in humans. “It becomes an arms race,” said Stearns. “This seems like a stupid thing to do, except for the seed companies which realize that the old seeds are now obsolete—they know it won’t work long-term. It sure works for their profits.”

There are a number of techniques that are more effective that smaller organic companies use. “Big companies don’t use these tech-

niques because it takes a little bit longer,” he said. His company uses a resistance breeding program that is not specific to one gene in the plant, but many characteristics. It is a technique that takes longer to develop, but is more effective. “It can be compared to this: Instead of giving a kid an antibiotic for strep, you alternate among two or three different treatments. This doesn’t give the disease a chance [to become resistant].”

“Most other seed companies in this country are stuck and dependant on huge wholesalers,” he said. “We offer retail seed companies with the professional advice they are used to getting from the big boys. Yet we’re smaller and don’t require that 5,000-pound minimum order.”

Stearns visits his growers throughout the season to provide technical assistance, inspect the seed crops for purity and take plant and seed samples for pathology testing. “We work with our seed producers in a way that no other seed company in the country does,” Stearns said.

### A growing need for seed

The consolidation of the seed industry, and the shrinking variety of seeds available to farmers, is potentially a boon for small seed producers. The most recent huge buyout was

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this year's Monsanto purchase of Seminis, which sells 3,500 varieties of fruit and vegetable seeds throughout the world and controls an estimated 40 percent of the U.S. market and 20 percent worldwide. According to a *New York Times* article (January 2005), this acquisition makes Monsanto the world's largest seed and biotech company, surpassing Dupont in "revenues derived from seeds and biotech traits."

This concerns many Northeast farmers, who fear that this kind of consolidation could lead to a loss of the variety of seeds that are now available to growers as less profitable strains are dropped. "Seminis was a very good seed company. They were a very reputable supplier with top-notch breeding. Many organic growers came to rely on them," said Stearns. Because of the marginal climate in the Northeast growers have fewer options of varieties. "Seminis filled a bigger niche here than other places," he said.

That niche, however, is what Stearns aims to fill. "It is a big enough niche for us to go after, but too small for them [Monsanto] to go after." This could potentially increase his customer base as nonorganic farmers look to obtain seeds as well. "We already have varieties others [bigger seed companies] don't have, and sometimes we're even cheaper than nonorganic," he said, noting that conventional red curry squash, for example, will sell for \$60 a pound, while he sells the same



PMR (powdery mildew resistant) Delicious 51 cantaloupe.

organic seed for \$20 a pound.

Organic farmers are, of course, a well-sustained market for the company. By law, those farmers who have certified organic farms must buy organic seed if it is commercially available (they are not tied legally to this legislation if the quality of the seed is poor or prices are prohibitive). While nationwide, the percentage of organic acreage using organic seeds is quite low, only 1 percent, demand is legislated, and Stearns projects that in five years that percentage will rise to at least 10 percent.

Currently, 75 percent of High Mowing Seeds' business comes from the seed rack program to retailers and from home gardeners; 25 percent are sold to commercial growers. By increasing his research and development team he hopes to flip-flop those

percentages in favor of commercial growers. "Each year, we're taking substantial leaps in improvement in quality," said Stearns, who noted that he just hired a full-time organic plant breeder, Dr. Mark Hutton, and has two other premier organic plant breeders onboard as consultants, Dr. John Navazio and Frank Morton with the Vegetable Breeding Institute at Cornell University. "We are the only seed company that we know of who is putting this kind of energy and resources into breeding varieties consciously for organic agriculture," said Stearns. The company also has a plant pathologist and seed testing analyst on staff with an on-site lab for identifying diseases and working on organically approved seed treatments and making sure that germination percentages are accurate in the field or greenhouse. Their new 5,000-square-foot seed cleaning facility ensures there is no weed seed or other crop seed contaminating the seed lot.

High Mowing Seeds currently has a variety of seeds that are commercial-grower ready, such as their beans, lettuce, all its cucurbits and Brassica salad greens (arugula, mustard greens). One of the best selling seed to commercial growers right now is arugula.

"We've got big plans," said Stearns. "If only Monsanto knew, they'd be shaking in their boots."

For more information, contact Tom Stearns at High Mowing Seeds at [Tom@highmowingseeds.com](mailto:Tom@highmowingseeds.com), or visit the High Mowing Seeds Web site at [www.highmowingseeds.com](http://www.highmowingseeds.com).



Marcia Passos Duffy is a freelance writer based in Keene, N.H. Have any interesting story ideas? Contact her at [marcia.duffy@cheshire.net](mailto:marcia.duffy@cheshire.net).

Drew Harwell in a field of lettuce seed in Maxwell, Calif.

