

# *The Garden Institute of B.C. Society*

Founded in 1998 by soil scientist Nancy Finlayson and agronomist Sharon Rempel ([www.grassrootsolutions.com](http://www.grassrootsolutions.com)) *The Garden Institute* is a registered Canadian charity. We worked as an Alberta non-profit organisation from 1998 to 2008. In 2008 we moved to B.C. We promote the principles and practices of organic agriculture, local food, food security and conservation of agriculture biodiversity. Current work focuses on finding varieties of heritage seeds and crops that are best suited for each growing region. This supports local food production, traditional knowledge conservation as well as biodiversity conservation.

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**Current Directors:** Sharon Rempel; Megan Halstead; Ian King

## **Project Themes:**

- Community development
- Biodiversity conservation
- Urban agriculture and local food
- Organic agriculture and gardening
- Community gardening
- Compost teas and plant nutrition
- Educational programs and materials
- Community seed banks
- Seed and farming literacy
- Traditional knowledge documentation
- Ethnomusicology
- Ethnobiology
- Cultural links with seed

## **Current Projects:**

### **‘Bringing Culture Back to Agriculture, Folk Back to Food’ project**

“Seed Literacy” and “Food Literacy” must be increased in academia, government and public sectors throughout Canada. “Value” of local varieties, landraces and heritage varieties must be defined by cultural communities, chefs, local food movements and communities.

A database to house historic seed catalogues, variety descriptions for old wheat, historic and current crop data, cultural information about story, song and music connected to heritage seed will be housed on the Seeds of Diversity Canada Seed Library database ([www.seeds.ca](http://www.seeds.ca)) and on [www.tgibc.org](http://www.tgibc.org) websites.

Sharon Rempel is collecting stories, songs and information about festivals that put seed into ‘context’ and ‘content’ in cultures that have formed and continue to form societies. The seed is the foundation of community food security and helping communities find ‘value’ with their heritage seed is the focus of the project work. *Funding from October Hill Foundation and Weston Foundation.*

### **Urban Agriculture Project**

TGIBC has promoted organic urban agriculture (turning lawns into gardens) since the 1990s. Current TGIBC director Megan Halstead is working as a Local Food Agronomist in Comox and Ian King producing a series of YouTube educational videos about urban agriculture food production based on his farming experience in 2010. Megan, Sharon and Ian will be creating a diversity of social media education materials about organic agriculture and seed saving. *Funding from October Hill Foundation.*

### **GIS Database project**

Sharon Rempel has been seeking funding and resources for 10 years to put together a GIS database that links farmers to field trial data and environment. In January 2008 Ontario farmer and GIS specialist Chris Wooding

approached Sharon as to 'what variety to grow at his farm'. Over the months a pilot project evolved to integrate historic crop data, historic climate data, soils maps, current field data for use of low input/heritage crop varieties in Canada, Europe and elsewhere and then match the GPS coordinates of a 'field' to best determine what varieties will grow there in current climatic and soil conditions. The database structure has been created and is housed in collaboration with Seeds of Diversity Canada ([www.seeds.ca](http://www.seeds.ca)) *Funding from October Hill Foundation and IDRC.*

### **Corn Nutrition Project**

Oregon organic farmer, seedsman and entomologist Munk Bergin has been involved in developing the 'terroir' of heritage corn and wheat and enhancing the nutritional qualities of the variety in each locale with the use of specific compost teas especially those that help with calcium availability to plant. He has found that antioxidant levels in a plant (color) selection may cause seed quality issues. He's been 'growing' community by integrating crops that have strong cultural significance back into the food supply. A bi-product of his work with purple corn is finding a lucrative cash return for the purple corn cobs as a natural dye. *Funding from October Hill Foundation for 2007-2010 research.*

### **BOB (Building on Biodiversity) - Bangladesh**

Our partner is SSARA, Executive Director Rakib Uddin Ahmed. They work in seed saving and organic agriculture in the area of Ishurdi, Pabna. We build community seed bank facilities and provided funding to teach farmers about organic agriculture. Conservation and practice of traditional Lalon folk music is part of the ongoing work. This links with our 'Bringing Culture Back to Agriculture Project'. *Funding: Personal donations.*

### **Past projects:**

#### **"Heritage Wheat Project"**

Working to develop community-based organic seed breeding, Sharon Rempel has connected farmers with heritage seeds, provided organic plant breeding services and other assistance to connect to other resources including artisan bakeries. We work with landraces and heritage varieties (such as *Red Fife* wheat) that are suited to bioregional growing and organic farming conditions. We support community seed bank projects and community development around food and seed security. We have helped grow projects in Nova Scotia, Alberta, B.C., North Dakota, Oregon, Saskatchewan, Sweden, Vancouver Island and Greece (Aegilops network). We helped set up the Heliotrust Foundation in the Maritimes with Canada's only conservation farm with a focus to conserve heritage wheat. Growing. Project has been managed by Sharon Rempel through TGIBC for nearly 15 years. *Funding from October Hill Foundation, Weston Foundation*

#### **"Seed Words Nepal"**

Project began in 2004. It combined 'literacy' of traditional knowledge about seeds with the Dalit (untouchable) people. We worked with USC Nepal and United Missions to Nepal designing the adult literacy materials. Project has spread through Nepal and into India with USC Canada's guidance with a focus on teaching organic agriculture farming practices and seed saving. *Funding from October Hill Foundation, Wild Rose Foundation and IDRC.* Project Manager: Sharon Rempel.

#### **BOB (Building on Biodiversity)**

In 1998 the project began working with immigrant communities in Edmonton, Alberta. A joint creation with Sharon Rempel and ESL teacher Anne Marie Brose that combined 'literacy' and 'agriculture' and 'seed' in community gardens and in the classroom. 'Garden' and 'Seed' were common themes in all cultures. Links were made with communities in their countries of origin to document traditional knowledge of plants and their uses using Participatory Action Research (PAR/PR) methods.. The knowledge has been used by the communities in various ways. Conservation of agricultural biodiversity is a strong component of this work as is developing adult literacy around seed wisdom.

*Funding from SAGE, IDRC, Wild Rose Foundation, Seeds of Diversity Canada, October Hill Foundation, CIDA, EJLB Foundation*

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## **BOB - El Salvador**

Project began in 1999. In 2001 the *BOB El-Salvador* project received *CIDA* funding for Phase 1 in El Salvador, with funding support from *Wild Rose Foundation* and *The October Hill Foundation*. It works in the area of micro-enterprise development while conserving traditional crop varieties. The project established strong links with the Edmonton Salvadorian community.

*BOB-El Salvador* was a joint project of *The Garden Institute of Alberta* and *The Balsam Association* of El Salvador. *The Balsam Association* is a Salvadoran non-profit organisation that has developed a local micro-lending network with particular focus on women and the environment. The primary objective of *BOB-El Salvador* was to conserve threatened traditional crops and the associated knowledge pertaining to the cultivation and use of these crops. Five Salvadoran communities used urban agriculture techniques to grow and conserve crops that have traditionally held an important place in the Salvadoran diet and culture. Many of these crops were no longer available or are unaffordable to these communities due to a decline in their cultivation in the Salvadoran countryside.

Goals achieved: 1. Created a market solution to the erosion of biodiversity in indigenous food and medicinal crops and the associated loss of traditional knowledge. 2. Raised income level of participant micro-entrepreneurs. 3. Provided an inexpensive source of locally produced, healthful food and a source of traditional plant-derived medicine. Activities completed: 1. Documented traditional knowledge of endangered economic plants. 2. Created model gardens to demonstrate urban agriculture methods and to serve as living seed banks. 3. Exchanged information and knowledge between Canadians and Salvadorans regarding appropriate technologies for urban agriculture. 4. Created micro-enterprise and seed conservation training programs. 5. Produced popular educational materials about how to sustain the use of plant biodiversity, soil, and water in urban agriculture.

Spin off project from BOB El Salvador – finding Indigo as a lucrative cash crop and focusing on natural dye production, creating high quality clothing for export and developing organic agriculture methods of producing indigo for local and export cash flow.

**Indigo Project.** [http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-67619-201\\_104599-1-IDRC\\_ADM\\_INFO.html](http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-67619-201_104599-1-IDRC_ADM_INFO.html) and contact person Nancy Finlayson (780) 469-3050. Project run through Action for Health Families, an Edmonton NGO.

**Garden Partners** – 1998-1999. We maintained a display teaching garden at the *Environmental Resource Center* and offered organic gardening courses. We surveyed greenspace in three Edmonton neighbourhoods for potential community gardening space. Funders: *Eco-Trust, Eco-Action 2000*.

**Edmonton Community Garden Network.** We assisted in the development of various community gardens in Edmonton and provided assistance in the formation of the original 1998 *Edmonton Community Garden Network*. We obtained funding from CAP in 2001 to hire a co-ordinator for the Network.

**Earth Challenge** educational program put together by Karin Adshead Dorish. We supported this innovative effort to bring gardening into the school curriculum. She developed K to 12 teaching units to integrate ‘seed’ into school programs but has not had interest from schools to bring this program to a trial phase.

**Seedy Saturday.** TGI has found funding and sponsored five Edmonton Seedy Saturday events. This event, founded by Sharon Rempel in 1989 has spread throughout Canada and the UK. It encourages the sharing of stories and seed. Visit [www.seeds.ca](http://www.seeds.ca) for a list of events in Canada.

## **Educational Materials we produced:**

**Organic Gardening in Alberta** written by Patricia McIsaac, 2000. This publication focuses on organic prairie gardening using heritage varieties. *Contents* include: Companion Planting; Garden Insect Pests; Heritage Varieties; Saving Seeds; Soil. Also *Growing Guides* for Beans; Cabbage Family; Corn; Cucumbers and Squash; Lettuce and Spinach; Onions and Garlic; Peas; Potatoes; Root Vegetables; Tomatoes. *Funding through EcoAction 2000 as part of our Garden Partners project.*

**'On Farm Research Guide'**. Written by Sharon Rempel. Demystifying 'research' and empowering farmers to do their own qualitative and quantitative observations. Available on line; visit <http://www.tgibc.org/> for a free download copy.

**'DIG. Diversity In Gardens.'** First written with funding from the Canadian Biodiversity Convention Office. A great tool for expanding awareness about food diversity. Written by Sharon Rempel. Available on line; visit <http://www.tgibc.org/> for a free download copy

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