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Anti-GMO Activists Take a Stand

Protesting GMOS by many means — including planting heirloom seeds

February 20, 2014 | 09:30 AM By [Jess Novak](#), Special Contributor



Gail Taylor is the owner of Three Part Harmony farm, an urban farm near her home in Washington, D.C.

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While protestors' **concerns about GMOs** and their goals for protesting vary from **organization** to organization and locality to locality, many people who actively protest **genetically engineered foods** cite the following issues as being at the root of their apprehension: an increased risk of crop contamination, altered nutrients, potential toxins, antibiotic resistance, amplified allergens, and ethical concerns.

The multinational chemical and agricultural biotechnology corporation **Monsanto**, which is at the forefront of **GMO seed development**, has been the target of a significant portion of the protests. Many of the concerns about Monsanto originate from the fact that the corporation has historically manufactured **many products** that proved to be extremely detrimental to the health of people and the environment, which the **U.S. government** now

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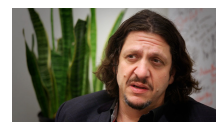
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acknowledges, including [Agent Orange](#), [DDT](#), and [PCBs](#). Protestors argue that Monsanto does not have a good track record of corporate citizenship and responsibility; therefore, Monsanto's assertions that they are concerned with the health and welfare of the environment surrounding their testing centers should not be trusted.

Protests against GMOs have taken different forms. Some protestors have taken to crop destruction. Last August, a field of golden rice — bioengineered to biosynthesize beta-carotene, a source of dietary Vitamin A, in which diets in underdeveloped parts of the world are often deficient — was uprooted in the [Philippines by protestors](#) who believe the crop could be harmful. But very few protests have involved crop destruction: most activists have instead chosen to make their point heard through demonstrations, picketing, and spreading information about GMOs. This winter, over a thousand locals from Hawaii were joined by a group of world-famous [surfers bearing picket signs](#) in the pouring rain as they raised their voices and picket signs against Monsanto, which has been developing GMO testing in Hawaii.

"I call the seed and chemical producers drug pushers, because basically what they want me to do is get addicted to their product and keep on buying more and more. Seeds are the source of life, and they are meant to reproduce in nature — not in a lab."

A quiet — but powerful — act of resistance that some small farmers have taken up has been developing seed collectives: rather than relying on GMO seeds, there are farmers who believe in keeping and exchanging heirloom, organic, non-GMO seeds that they can try to protect by keeping them separate from GMO crops.

We spoke with farmer and activist Gail Taylor about her concerns regarding GMOs, [the role of farmers](#) in GMO protests, and the strides activists have made in recent years. Taylor is a market gardener and yoga

practitioner who lives in an intentional community in Washington, D.C. She is the owner of [Three Part Harmony farm](#); an urban farm near her Petworth home, a member of the DC Black Growers' Network and the Mid-Atlantic Seed-Keeper's Cooperative, and a founding member of the [Community Farmers' Alliance](#).

What efforts have you and your fellow protesters made that you are most proud of?

I was pretty pleased with our humble little group of folks who planted Blue Navajo corn on May 25th this year, which was also a day that people around the world held protests against Monsanto. I had already been invited to be part of a seed-keepers' collective, and since we have a growing site that's pretty isolated, it was possible to grow corn and not have it be contaminated by neighboring farms. Our efforts carry this sacred seed stock forward a few more generations. It was an honor to take the ears which had been given to our friend as a gift from others who grew it in New Mexico, and carry it forward. And this year we'll pick another corn variety to preserve. I feel like corn may seem symbolic, but in real terms it's terribly endangered because of cross-contamination issues. It's getting harder and harder for organic, GMO-free seed suppliers to certify their seed stock

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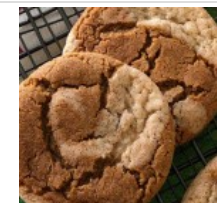
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using third-party labs because GMO corn is becoming so pervasive and invasive. I'm lucky that I'm not surrounded by industrial, conventional farmers growing commodity crops. It's one of the advantages to being in a city.

How do GMOs negatively affect the "hands-on knowledge of food production and social justice values" that you hold in esteem?

For our farm, an important part of upholding social justice values means caring about our impact on the environment, and the people who do the work. I think one of the most devastating things about the use of GMOs is their forced reliance on increased amounts of chemical-based pesticides and herbicides. I call the seed and chemical producers drug pushers, because basically what they want me to do is get addicted to their product and keep on buying more and more. Seeds are the source of life, and they are meant to reproduce in nature — not in a lab.

It seems counterintuitive that a farm, a place so vibrant with life and growing things, would also be a place where humans, **animals**, and soils are poisoned from these chemicals. But each time the technology brings us a new and better version, it comes with even more pounds of poison that I have to use. If it's too toxic for me, it's too toxic for all of the workers, the volunteers, and especially the families who come through and visit our urban farm. There's no justice in a food system that purports to make food for the masses while at the same time poisoning the workers.

What role does the seed-keepers' collective play in resisting GMOs?

As a seed buyer, it's hard to avoid GMOs. Without getting actively involved in changing that dynamic, we're powerless and just have to accept what they give us. I always wanted to let experts take care of seed saving, but when I started talking to people at small seed banks — like Seed Saver's Exchange, Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, and even smaller ones in Oregon and New York — in addition to experiencing my own frustration in wanting to have a good product available that I know I can count on as deriving from a reputable source, I realized that we all have to do our part to preserve this sacred life source. It's hard for small farmers to switch from production mode to seed saving completely, so the seed keeper's collective helps us all to do just a little bit towards a greater vision. And it's not just avoiding GMOs that we should be focusing on as the goal, because buying from the three main seed suppliers and supporting their control over the world's food supply happens even if you buy seeds that are not GMO. Once this technology runs through its profitability, they'll come up with something else. The point is to maintain food sovereignty. So our farm has a policy against buying seed from Monsanto, DuPont, Syngenta, or any of their subsidiaries.

What made you first aware of the issue of GMOs, and how did you come to play such an active role in the protests?

I wouldn't say I'm any more active than other sustainable agriculture folks. I can't remember when I first became aware of GMOs — it didn't really affect me for a long time because I don't grow commodities. But I remember when Monstanto bought Seminis. One of the most important seeds for the farm I was working at during this time was a tomato seed that yielded literally tons of tomatoes. There was just no comparison to the other varieties. Since the



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FDA wasn't going to require the **labeling of modified seeds** any differently than non-modified seeds, there would be no way to tell if or when Monsanto would start splicing salmon genes into those tomato seeds, so we just quit buying them altogether. I still don't know of an adequate replacement. And I can't say for sure if that seed has been modified. But Monsanto owns the rights to do so if it wishes, and I won't take that chance.

When people suggest that GMOs can be life-saving (for instance, golden rice, full of much-needed Vitamin A) what is the protestors' answer? Do you believe that all GMOs are problematic, or is there a balance that might be achieved?

I think a lot of things are life-saving. Basic preventative health care is life-saving, but that doesn't mean that billions of dollars go into making sure that all people can see a doctor when they are sick. Eating well in general can be life-saving. But many people every day go to bed and they haven't consumed enough calories to sustain themselves, let alone have access to the vitamins and nutrients that are abundant in the food that I — and many others like me — grow with such care. A lack of access to basic nutrition doesn't have anything to do with whether or not we have GMO products on the market; this deficiency has to do with a failed food system and an inequitable health care system. From a company that holds shareholder meetings to announce how much profit they made, I can't take seriously any claims that they care about people's lives.

It seems that GMOs may play a role in reducing biodiversity globally. Is this a concern of yours and The Community Farming Alliance?

I'm not that sure I have the expertise to answer this question completely. Biodiversity is important, which is why I always grow several varieties of the same vegetable and multiple vegetables in the same season. I also interplant flowers and herbs to aid in pollination and as part of an integrated pest management program. Nothing is guaranteed in farming, and we always have to respond to weather and ever-changing situations in nature. I don't see how GMOs in and of themselves are such a blow to biodiversity. I think monocropping has a huge negative impact on healthy ecosystems, but that can happen with thousands of acres of organic certified carrots just like that can happen with thousands of acres of conventional GMO soy.

What can people who aren't farmers do to help support local farms that use non-GMO seeds?

Buying from your local farmers is always a good idea. Go to farmers' markets or join a CSA. Ask your local grocery store or co-op to buy locally. Stop eating out! Very few restaurants are sourcing locally on a significant level, so you kind of have to just eat at home: food that you cook that doesn't come in a package, which I understand is easier said than done.

But you have to remember that all of the items you can buy directly from farmers are just a small part of the food system. If you want to be more careful about where your food comes from, then considering items like vegetables, fruit, eggs, dairy, and milk — items that you can buy directly from a farmer or CSA — are only a small portion of what you consume and are not really impacted that much from GMO technology.

You would be better off going to a website like **Green**

America to get a list of companies that are making products from GMOs so you know what to avoid. Without the labeling of packaged foods, it's pretty hard to buy anything in a package because you have to assume that it's GMO. Now General Mills says they are making **Cheerios GMO free**, and labeling it as such. That's great, but GMOs are already all over your house and kitchen: the sugar you eat, the cotton shirt you wear, the bread for your kids' pb&j sandwiches, the soda you drink, any sweet with high fructose corn syrup. Soy is in everything, and that's pretty much all GMO. You can't become an expert on everything in your house. Really, we need to have a labeling system so people can just decide for themselves.

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