



Seeds of Scotland: a food revolution starts with seeds

The story of Shetland kale tells of local adaptation, resilience and tradition, as Finlay Keiller explains.

We started growing vegetables on the lee side of a crumbly wall on the west coast of the Shetland Islands. We wanted to learn how to grow food, to eat healthier, to reduce our carbon footprint and to see what was possible on our small plot. We had learned about the historic communal village plots, located nearby. Stories of patches full of tatties, carrots, neeps and kale encouraged us to get digging. Living on an island, it is hard not to be aware of the fragility of food supply, especially when ferry disruptions occur. If the boat is cancelled for more than a couple of days, supermarket shelves empty quickly and there may not be many other options for fresh food. The remnants of the communal plots located just below ours, cultivated within living memory, were a constant reminder of the pace and scale of change in our island's food supply.

With the advantage of not relying on it for our sustenance, we found a lot of joy in growing food—a sense of accomplishment with every beetroot

pulled, carrot unearthed, every leaf of lettuce plucked. The satisfaction of bringing it to the kitchen, knowing it was the result of our own efforts, made it taste all the better, no matter how modest the harvest. However, there were many challenges to growing in our exposed plot, and despite the satisfaction we got and the work we put in, there were not many bumper harvests. Much of what we planted was not too grateful for its surroundings, battered by the strong and salty wind. With one notable exception thriving and undeterred no matter what the weather. Intrigued by the name, we had planted some Shetland kale and it appeared very much at home in its surroundings.

Shetland kale

Shetland kale has been grown on the Shetland Islands for several hundred years and it has a strong connection to the history of the Islands; a truly multipurpose plant used both in the kitchen and for fodder. Unique traditions, practices and even poems have been borne from its cultivation. The accumulated collective knowledge associated with the growing of Shetland kale is kept alive by those who grow it. Therefore, there is a strong interconnectivity between



Excerpt from *Auld Maunsie's Crö* [1]:

'Oot-ower apon a weel-kent hill,
Whase watters rise
ta grinnd a mill,
Auld Maunsie biggit him a crö,
Ta growe him kale for
mutton brö—
Fir Maunsie never tocht
him hale,
Withoot sheeps' shanks
an cogs o kale'

Top: Fin and Haley holding sheafs of bere barley and Shetland aets. Photo: Jossie Ellis.

Right: Shetland kale. Photo: Seeds of Scotland.

Shetland kale, the Shetland Islands and the Shetland Islanders.

An important part of the growing of the kale is the process of saving its seeds. Growers choose a selection of their favourite plants and allow them to flower and set seed to be grown again or shared. There may be many factors in determining the 'favourite' or 'best' kale plants but in general the healthiest and most vigorous are chosen. These plants may not necessarily look the same as each other and each grower may have had different preferences to their neighbour. As a result Shetland kale is wonderfully diverse. If you were to grow ten plants next to each other, they will all look and grow slightly differently. This genetic diversity means these plants are inherently more resilient than their modern, less genetically diverse, counterparts. Consequently, Shetland kale has become highly adapted to the tough growing conditions of Shetland. Within this genetic diversity also lies the potential for further adaptation to new and changing climatic conditions. So it is no wonder that Shetland kale thrived in our plot.

Seed monopoly

If you look into the origin of some of the other packets of seeds we were growing in our plot, most of which we had bought at the local garden centre, you will find that their origin is not so clear. The seeds in these packets were the end point in what is often a long and convoluted supply chain. It is not uncommon for seed to be produced in one country before being multiplied in another then packaged in a third country before finally being sold in a fourth. The vast majority of seed available to UK growers is not grown here. We are a net importer of horticultural seeds with an estimated, "Over 80 per cent of open (or naturally) pollinated seed imported" [2]. There are precious few options available to growers who are looking for locally adapted seeds.

There are many reasons for this. At the forefront are the economies of scale and the forces of globalisation which have moved production around the globe to areas where it is cheaper and easier to produce seed at scale.

Seeds of Scotland's farm in Easter Ross.
Photo: Seeds of Scotland.

Seeds are big business; they are the starting point for almost all of our food system and after several decades of conglomeration and consolidation of ownership, now over 60 per cent of the global seed industry is owned by just four companies [3]. There is little space in this system for locally adapted, culturally significant, genetically diverse varieties that have poems written about them. Similar to the lack of control islanders have regarding the fragility of food supply chains associated with cancelled ferries, growers have increasingly less control over their supply of seeds.

Seed culture

Several generations ago in the UK, growers' relationship with seed saving was likely a bit different, more similar to that of the growers of Shetland kale. It would have been much more widespread for seeds to be saved and resown or swapped between gardeners and farmers. Presumably, as a result of this, there were many more locally adapted varieties just like Shetland kale.

The story Shetland kale tells of local adaptation, resilience and tradition is a source of constant inspiration. It is the seed that started our journey into professional horticulture and eventually to starting Seeds of Scotland. Seeds of Scotland is a Highland-based seed company located just north of Inverness. Our small farm consists of two parcels of land overlooking the beautiful Cromarty Firth, with a total area of around one hectare. Seed processing and packing takes place in an old grain drying loft near the fields. The farm was established in March 2023 and is certified as organic with the Soil Association as of January 2025. In 2024, we won £20,000 from the Jude Dunn Land Fund competition with which to buy equipment critical for the development of our business. We are currently the only commercial seed producer growing and selling vegetable seeds for small-scale growers in Scotland.

A lot of our time is spent searching for and testing newer varieties which we believe will thrive in our climate. We grow and gather seed from existing Scottish heritage varieties like Sutherland kale, Musselburgh leeks or Scotland yellow tomatoes,

varieties sourced from gene banks such as Norrlands express pea, and from varieties from regions with similar climates to ours like the Irish onion 'Buan'.



Each variety is trialled to assess its suitability, and the best-performing plants are then grown to produce seed, just as with Shetland kale. We have now begun to sell the seeds we produce. All of the seeds we sell can be saved and re-sown whilst maintaining their distinctive characteristics year on year and we actively encourage our customers to try and save their own seed. We hope that by doing this it is possible to create more space for locally adapted, culturally significant, genetically diverse varieties that may even one day have poems written about them too.

seedsofscotland.com

References

1. *Auld Maunsie's Crö* by Basil R. Anderson (1861 - 1888). Full poem at tinyurl.com/Maunsie-full
2. Price, D. (2021). *The seeds of diversity: the challenges of seed supply in extraordinary times*. Agricolology blog at tinyurl.com/Seeds-diversity
3. Strömberg, A. & Howard, P. (2023). *Recent changes in the global seed industry and digital agriculture industries*. tinyurl.com/Seed-industry

Finlay Keiller runs Seeds of Scotland with partner, Haley Shepherd.