

The Seed Co-operative finds a home!

On the 4 February 2016 the Seed Co-operative became the new owners of Gosberton Bank Nursery; a hugely exciting moment, coming at the end of a tortuous process to first find somewhere suitable, and then secure a combination of share purchases and short-term loans to enable the purchase.

The Seed Co-operative is a Community Benefit Society, registered under the full name of Biodynamic and Organic Plant Breeding and Seeds Limited. The Seed Co-operative came about to provide a future for open-pollinated seeds. See articles in OG32, OG30 and OG25. Gosberton is situated in the middle of an area that is dotted with seed companies, half way between Spalding and Boston in south Lincolnshire not far from the A16 and A17. The Grade 1 soil is ideally suited to vegetable growing and the relatively dry climate should make it easier to harvest seed crops in the autumn than in other parts of the country.

A site with huge potential

On a total site of 9.62 ha (24 acres) we are fortunate to have approximately 10,408.37m² (112,036 sq ft) of glasshouses in four separate buildings. All buildings have overhead irrigation and ventilation systems. They have soil floors, though it will take some time to bring back the soil life and vitality that we need. There are also six substantial polytunnel frames all measuring approximately 29 m x 8 m. All require new covers and some restoration work. The size of some of the trees growing amongst the tunnels indicates they haven't seen action for some time! There is a clay-lined reservoir for irrigation, which is fed from the roofs of the glasshouses and from land drains. The land is of mainly Wisbech series, being coarse silty calcareous alluvial gley soils. Top soils are silt loam and subsoils are greyish mottled calcareous silty loam. A small proportion of the land is peppertorpe/Tanvats series, which is described as fine silty over clayey alluvial gley soils. All boys' stuff compared to the clay soils of Suffolk where David and Kate were growing seed crops last year! With 7 ha (17.5 acres) of cultivable land outdoors, there is masses of potential. With buildings suitable for seed processing, machinery maintenance and storage, and a modern spacious and energy efficient house for staff accommodation and offices we have everything we need here to bring our plans to fruition. Not only does the site provide us with the facilities for our own seed production and sales, plant breeding and knowledge sharing activities, it also will allow us to create a hub for processing seed produced by a network of small organic or biodynamic growers around the UK.

At present there are two Seed Co-operative staff living and working on site, David Price and Kate Ayre, with help and advice from Hans Steenbergen from Stormy Hall Seeds and others. There are opportunities for people to volunteer here too. The Seed Co-operative is now registered as a WWOOF host. As the land was not certified organic we have entered the holding into biodynamic conversion, which means we have two years to get our act together! The fields have been sown with grass/clover leys, the glasshouses cultivated and sown with lucerne once the complexities of the irrigation system had been got to grips with.



From small seeds...

Buying Gosberton Bank Nursery is only the beginning. There is much work to do in getting the place in order, and functioning the way that we want it to do. However, our first challenge is to raise the funds to pay off the short-term loans that will secure our tenure of the property.

We were very fortunate in 2015 to have great support from a wide range of people and organisations, in various ways. Through the generosity of donations, grants, share purchases and a legacy we raised £250,000, plus additional sums in a short-term mortgage and loans. In total our budgets show that we need to raise a further £500,000 in 2016 to pay off those loans and capitalize our work, which includes the purchase of Gosberton Bank Nursery and equipment costs, plus some initial staff costs to get us to a stage where we have undertaken renovation work and completed the organic conversion process.

We are planning a Community Share Offer campaign in the autumn. By introducing a wider audience to our work we will bring in new supporters and shareholders and a significant proportion of the total funding required. You can, however buy shares right now or support us by buying seeds from our online shop.

If you would like to find out more and to become involved, please come to our first AGM and open day on July 23rd. There will be an opportunity to explore the site, meet other growers and take part in workshops on seed production. More information at www.seedcooperative.org.uk

*David Price and
Phil Sumption*



Onion breeding lines are planted out at Gosberton Bank

Photos: Phil Sumption