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## **The Seed Savers' Network**

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Access to good quality planting material is a top priority for the villagers, women's groups and agricultural teachers and students whom we recently trained in community seed banking in Tonga and the Solomon Islands. The seed production segments of our training were greeted with great enthusiasm as the concept is a relatively novel one to peoples who garden mostly vegetatively reproduced plants.

Our Australian-based Seed Savers' Trust facilitates the collection, multiplication and public access of a wide range of local seeds and other planting material for food and agriculture. This, in our view, is the essential first step towards household food security and regional economic self reliance. It also aids the conservation of agricultural biodiversity.

Our educational organisation, The Seed Savers' Trust and its network of 4000 farmers and gardeners, has been actively conserving useful plants in Australia for the last ten years. In the Pacific we are currently setting up:

- The collection and dissemination of local vegetable varieties suitable to sustainable farming systems.
- Databases on the availability and location of important fruit and nut trees and other plants of economic importance such as for fibre, perfume, cosmetics, soil regeneration, fodder and forestry.
- Living collections of important food trees in schools, church grounds, markets, and other public spaces.
- Training in home garden design, sustainable farming techniques and the promotion of under-utilised plants, including permaculture practices.
- A Pacific exchange network for seed banks and field collection.

Over the last year we have initiated seed and planting material networks in the Solomon Islands in collaboration with Appropriate Technology, Community and Environment (APACE); in Cuba, with the permaculture-oriented Australian Green

Team and in Tonga with The United Kingdom Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific. In each case a team centred very much around indigenous NGOs was formed to administer the network with initially modest newsletters including lists of varieties offered.

During recent Community Seed Bank training in Tonga and the Solomon Islands, we found that many plants significant to their cultures are endangered, such as:

- Local varieties of fruit and nut trees that were once widely grown have been the victims of cyclones, disease or development, and are not replaced. For example, the much-loved Tongan native nut, the ai (*Canarium* spp.), or the national emblem, the fragrant Heilala tree (*Garcinia sessilis*), are rarely grown nowadays in backyards or plantations.
- In the Solomon Islands, small populations of vegetable varieties of local cucumbers, watermelons, Chinese cabbage and open pollinated corn are disappearing through cross pollination with imported hybrids.
- Many medicinal, fibre, and dye trees and shrubs are increasingly difficult to locate because of land clearing for agricultural exports.

The promotion of a greater range of food tree and lesser known tree crops grown for posterity in public places, will not only help redress the poor diet of urban children and adults but will also link conservation and utilisation of plant genetic resources.

At IPC6 I am hoping to make contact with others who are working in this field with a view to coordinating a global network of seed saving groups.