



Puerto Rico

Home of the Department of Food

WRITTEN BY

TARA RODRÍGUEZ BESOSA AND LEX BARLOWE

Hundreds of seeds, some in glass jars, others in envelopes, are being organized on the balcony of a house in the mountains of Puerto Rico.

Parcha: passion fruit from the wild vine up the mountain. Gandules: pigeon peas from the bush behind the community store. Seeds from a watermelon a neighbor grew after eating the rest. All were harvested within the community and gathered together. Some of the seeds are seen in process, fermenting in jars or being cleaned and put to dry on plates on the balcony's edge, with pieces of paper identifying them underneath, and a bright sun shining fiercely over them. The balcony looks out over the farm, and the main view is the mountain in the form of a *cemí*, a Taíno deity or spirit, that residents call "Monte Pirucho." Other seeds are transferred into new jars and labeled before being taken back into the house or packed up to exchange with farmers later that day.

This is a typical scene at the home of some of the members of the collective of El Departamento de la Comida, Puerto Rico's nongovernmental "Department of Food," a small grassroots project nestled in the mountains some 45 minutes south of San Juan. The home, an eight-acre formerly abandoned farm, was purchased in 2018 by Tara Rodríguez Besosa, one of its members, who originally founded the project in 2010 as a multi-farmer CSA model (Community Supported Agriculture). She drops some seeds into an envelope and says, "After giving it much thought and analyzing how our own farm could support other farmers and our own projects within the

collective, we decided to focus on seeds. We are less interested in starting a seed company and more invested in creating a seed 'sanctuary,' especially in Puerto Rico, where we've lost much of our own crop diversity due to agroindustry and colonialism."

SEED-KEEPING FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Puerto Rico imports more than 90% of its food, a number that increases with time and hurricanes. When food travels, it usually is not fresh, and most imported food is processed and turned into non-perishable, canned goods. Most of the incoming food has traveled thousands of miles, making its way to Puerto Rico through the nearest U.S. port in Jacksonville, Florida. It takes an average of 14 days for most food to travel to Puerto Rico, and many factors affect its travels, costs, and availability to consumers. This is where groups like El Departamento de la Comida come into play.

The collective efforts of El Departamento de la Comida, and many other grassroots organizations, are creating alternatives to federal agencies and multinational corporations for food and farming. El Departamento's work around local heirloom seed is part of that. Here especially, seed-keeping must be central to food sovereignty work. Puerto Rico is one of the world's largest GMO seed producers (Genetically Modified Organism). Most of the soybean and cottonseed used in the United States comes from Monsanto/Bayer on the island.

Deepening Boricua communities' relationship to seed is more than a project in seed saving. Seeds allow Puerto Ricans, like other communities, to reclaim an identity that has for many generations

PHOTO: Samantha María, El Departamento de la Comida. CREDIT: Adnelly Marichel.

been an object of attack, colonization, and erasure. As the genetic variety of crops continues to decrease in Puerto Rico, so do the numbers of people who have inhabited these islands. It is and has been a contested place, once a colony of Spain, now of the United States, making it one of the oldest colonies in the world. This “Rich Port” has always been a point of exchange, travel stop, and an important part of Atlantic trade and slave routes.

Tara’s partner, Lex Barlowe, adds, “The only way to counter corporate control is a community-controlled seed supply,” as she labels seeds on the balcony. Lex maintains the inventory of most of the seeds of El Departamento de la Comida, as well as her own collection, in her small studio apartment in Brooklyn, New York. Lex works to build community seed networks and is a member of Reclaim Seed NYC, a seed library and education project for seed sovereignty in New York City. “Seeds connect people. To each other, to our histories. And that connection builds self-determination. Seed libraries are forms of cooperation and mutual aid, sharing stories, seeds, skills for a collective resource people can all contribute to and depend on.” Lex draws inspiration and guidance from this type of resource sharing that has always happened in Black communities, especially amongst Black farmers. And she focuses on gathering and sharing seeds and stories of the Black/African diaspora, which are central to food and culture across the United States and the Caribbean.

HONORING THE STORIES OF SEEDS

Projects focused on seeds are emerging everywhere, with seed libraries and exchanges popping up in urban areas, rural communities, schools, and museums. But seed saving is an ancient, ancestral practice; it is nothing new. It is true that all people who have fought to maintain collective community control over seed have been affected horribly by the industrialization and privatization of seed. Today the control over

huge amounts of seed is maintained mostly by white people — their companies and organizations. Simultaneously, across the world, seeds (among many other things) have been stolen from BIPOC communities (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) while their efforts toward seed

sovereignty remain under-resourced.

Together, Tara and Lex started the campaign #QueNoSePierdaLaSemilla, “may the seed not be lost” in Spanish. For them, #QueNoSePierdaLaSemilla is a call to all marginalized and colonized people to reconnect with their

ancestral foods and seed, in community with others. It offers steps for building seed sovereignty, sharing and honoring seeds’ stories, peoples, skills, and traditions. The name is in Spanish, and the content is

bilingual to expand the existing resources in Spanish around seed sovereignty, since there are very few. Most farmworkers in the United States speak Spanish, and their knowledge and labor is the foundation of our current food system.

Seeds have become the heart of El Departamento’s work. Goals include supporting farmers who save seeds already and making seeds more accessible to others. Right now, this looks like seed exchanges; visiting farms to help them gather, clean, and organize seeds; and managing a community seed, tool, and educational materials library.

The contents of the seed library are based on what farmers have already been saving. People bring seeds that are important to them to the seed exchanges. They bring the seeds they want to see others growing. “Exchanges are moments of education between growers. They are places to gather and share stories. When people bring seed, we interview them and hear their story and the story of each seed. Others at the exchange listen, learn, and can then apply it with the seeds they take home. People share stories and advice and lessons. Those stories immediately become the community-generated expertise that we look to about how to grow, keep, and use the seeds.” El Departamento’s seed resources and gatherings emerge from what people bring to each other, how they gather together, and how they learn from each other.

REBUILDING LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

New food systems require shifting our food cultures and reclaiming generational wisdom as part of creating different models. “The cultural information shared through story at our seed exchanges is so important. It helps younger generations understand different traditional practices and carry them forward. With this knowledge we can best figure out what our strategies need to be to build a culture of food and farming that works for and supports the community.” This sharing of culture is the foundation of El Departamento’s efforts to create more structures and opportunities for food-based development and local economies. Their most recent “Intercambio de Semillas” took place in their base community of San Salvador, a barrio of the Caguas municipality, during the town’s annual celebration of agriculture, food, and agricultural legacy. The culture of San Salvador is shaping El Departamento’s work, which will be focused there as will their seed projects.

Back on the balcony, Tara and Lex review the seed inventory after the day’s organizing. In San Salvador, seeds will continue to be collected and redistributed, but also replanted. Farm planning for seed cultivation will begin here soon. Their storage will be moving to a small building at the bottom of the mountain, El Departamento’s new headquarters opening in 2020. It will hold the Agroteca — the resource library of seeds, books, and tools — and, mainly, the kitchen. Some seeds are getting packed away to prepare for this move. Others will be labeled and put into the traveling seed library, a cooler for fishing equipment turned seed box. With its hub here, members of the collective bring in seed from farming communities that span Santurce, Puerto Rico to New York City, and other queer and BIPOC communities from many places. “We hope to make our ancestors proud, and our communities stronger.”

PHOTO: Tara Rodriguez Besosa. CREDIT: Adnelly Marichiel.

