Our Foods: Chatting About Métis Food Sovereignty | Episode #5: Part One - Seed Saving with Natalie Pepin

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Taanishi, tansi! Welcome to another episode of Our Foods: Chatting about Métis Food Sovereignty. This podcast is presented and made possible by the Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research, the RCMR, and in partnership with the Métis Nation of Alberta and MNA Health. Today's episode is the first in a two-part series where we're joined by Natalie Pepin to talk about seed saving: what it is, its importance to Métis history, culture, and [00:01:00] identity, and also how you can get involved with it if you want to. I'm so happy that I got an opportunity to chat with Natalie, and I hope that you all enjoy listening, maarsii.

[00:01:27] **Devonn Drossel:** Hello, tanisi everybody. We are joined this week by Natalie Pepin, who is going to talk to us about seed saving and specifically the role that seed saving can play in our Métis community and how it relates to Métis food sovereignty and our food practices in general. So I'm really looking forward to this conversation and I hope that you all enjoy it. And thank you so much, Natalie, for being here. I'm really excited to hear what you have to say about this topic and just to see where the conversation goes. So yeah. Thank you, [00:02:00] maarsii, and if you want to introduce yourself, I'll hand it over to you.

[00:02:06] **Natalie Pepin:** *Taanishi, Natalie Pepin dishinihkaashoon. Tawatinaw niwiken, pi Winnipeg d'ooshchiin.* Hello, my name is Natalie Pepin. I live here in Northern Alberta in a place called the Tawatinaw Valley and I'm originally from Winnipeg.

[00:02:24] **Devonn Drossel:** Thank you. As we kind of talked about normally when the guest gets here, we just ask you to answer a quick icebreaker question. So I'm just gonna put you on the spot and ask what is your first or strongest or fondest food memory?

[00:02:41] **Natalie Pepin:** I was thinking about this and I can remember being quite young and we, I grew up in Winnipeg and then just south of Winnipeg. And one of the things that we always had around us was choke cherry [00:03:00] trees. And I remember picking choke cherries. And it's funny because. Nowadays there's a lot of people are like, why do you eat those? They don't taste that great. They're dry, but it's one of those foods that, you know, I just, I love them. I reminds me of pancakes. So I think that's one of my earliest memories is just picking and eating chokecherries. And, and it's something actually that I've, I've been focusing on this summer too, as I do a lot of foraging and wild harvesting for my family. And

it's been a few years actually, since I've found any chokecherry picks so that's one of my focuses this week is to go pick a bunch of chokecherries and to make some.

[00:03:49] **Devonn Drossel:** Oh, I love that. It's so interesting. There's quite a few guests and myself included who, when we ask this icebreaker question, berries are the food that come up. [00:04:00] And so that's so... I, I just love that. I think I wasn't anticipating the berries would be such like a strong thread for so many people, but it also makes perfect sense. And I, I love that. I love hearing stories about choke cherries. My mom grew up in Northern Saskatchewan, so kind of like close to the PA region and she always talked about picking choke cherries and that they would have like spitting contests to see who could spit the pits, the farthest. So. Yeah. So I have never actually picked chokecherries myself. So I might have to, I might have to try that this year, too. So, yeah, thank you for sharing that. So I guess to kind of ground us in this conversation probably would be good to start with an explanation of, or discussion of what seed saving as a practice is, and then expanding on that, how it relates to food sovereignty.

[00:04:59] **Natalie Pepin:** [00:05:00] Absolutely. Seed saving, you know, it's one of these interesting practices, both culturally and historically that has become so odd for us in our modern lives. And what I mean by odd is that we don't do it much nowadays. We, when we think about growing anything or needing seeds in general, we think of buying them. In a paper envelope from a garden store or you know, a garden center online even, and, and seed saving. It's often one of those things when it comes to growing food, you know, and this is if somebody even gardens, if they even plant a seed ever in their lifetimes, producing the seed or, or harvesting the seed. It's one of those next level food sovereignty, things for most people. And so a lot of people, even those who are, you know, gardening for themselves and they're [00:06:00] putting up food for the winter. It's, it's one of these skills that is just not as widely practiced anymore. And it's actually not that difficult.

There are some crops that are, are more challenging or complex to save seeds from, but some of them are really, really simple. But it's important to note, this is the foundation of food sovereignty, our seeds, without them, there can't be food sovereignty for future generations, even something like an apple tree, which is going to live, let's say 25 30, maybe 35 years for its productive life eventually, if no other seeds are ever planted, then we're going to lose that tree and all the genetic information from that tree someday. And so the seeds represent the ability of our future generations to feed themselves, [00:07:00] which is significant in so many ways, but on a more, let's say a shorter time scale, your ability to plant a garden next year. You know, even if you did this for the ability to do it again next year is based on having seeds to plant. And, and this is when we're talking about both annual and perennial foods, because even our perennial foods, those wild foods that we pick in the forest, or out on the Prairie's these all eventually have to reproduce in order for our children and our grandchildren to continue to enjoy those foods.

So it's incredibly significant and it's incredibly for people to be actively practicing these skills. So what that does is it puts us into a very insecure position when it comes to our food security. If we don't know how to do this, now, I would say, as I said earlier, this is a next level skill actually, I [00:08:00] recommend you should learn how to grow a carrot first, and then five years down the road, you're going to worry about saving seeds from that carrot.

So it's, it's important because we can't have food sovereignty without the ability to capture, to gather to help, to help foster or midwife, I like to say, these seeds and, and yet you know, it's, it's one of these things that it's a dying art to keep those. That, that genetic information that, that next generation of food alive. So yeah, it's interesting from that perspective And when it comes to actually, as I mentioned earlier, producing these seeds or, or capturing fostering them or midwifing them, it's actually not that hard. It's really, truly not that hard to get started. I'm, I'm staring at a bowl of onion, seed or onion flowers with seeds in [00:09:00] them and all I had to do to get these seeds this year was put some, what we call onion sets, the little tiny bulbs that you plant in your garden and you can pick them and they'll grow into big onions, and then you pick them and eat them. Or, you can just leave them a little bit longer and they'll produce flowers and then they'll be pollinated and then they'll produce, and then you pick the seeds instead of the onion.

So it's, it's truly just a matter of giving it a little bit longer in your garden, waiting and watching and just knowing when it's ready to go pick. And that's really not that hard. Onion seeds are remarkably expensive to purchase as seeds go, and remarkably easy to collect seed from. So that's another point is that this actually saves a lot of money. Seeds are, are pretty much the most expensive part of growing any food. They're they're remarkably expensive [00:10:00] and from a food security standpoint, they're also, it's, it's really challenging for me to see just how few companies we actually purchase seeds from that most of our seed stock is in the hands of a few companies. And if you love those companies, then whatever, that's fine. If you don't love those companies that might be concerning for you, but either way, it's, it creates a setting where our food is more insecure because of that. So the more people we have saving seed and trading seed and planting those seeds in the place where they live, we're going to have a better seed stock. We're going to have better genetic information, and we're all going to have an easier time accessing seed in the future. If everybody is saving seeds.

[00:10:55] **Devonn Drossel:** Absolutely. Yeah. I think you bring up a really important parts or that [00:11:00] monopoly that a very few, a very small number of people have on the seeds that we have access to. And yeah, I think that, that, that you also bring up another good point in that saving seeds and learning how to save seeds, help us, helps us to address, as you know, just regular people that, that barrier that is large for a lot of people when it comes to starting a garden, which is the price of seeds, right? Like they are incredibly expensive. Especially if, you know, if you're, cause there's obviously different qualities of seed as well, right? The seeds that you get at the dollar store are not going to have the same germination rates as the ones that you get from, you know organic more,, more dedicated sort of company setting, right. What do you think, have you ever come across anything that indicated sort of why why seed saving did really sort of start to decline in the way that it has and, so rapidly and dramatically? [00:12:00]

[00:12:01] **Natalie Pepin:** Yeah. You know, it it's really correlated with lack of access to land. So we've had this, this period of time over the past couple of hundred years in the land where we live, where we have people who were out on the land, who had a relationship with, who were interacting with those, who were, who were I call sculpting the landscape, their activities, and this included saving seed relocating seeds as they traveled, collecting seeds for food, for medicine, for art. And so. Really intimate relationship with all of these

plants that were producing these seeds, but it's because we have lived on the land and we live very close to the land. And so as you remove that connection to the land, then what you're doing is you're removing these. Incidents where we can develop those relationships [00:13:00] where we can understand, you know, which part is the seed, even of a plant. What does it even look like? And it doesn't take very many generations to lose those skills when you remove people from the land. And of course, as a people we've experienced you know, in the last hundred to 150 and for some up to 200 years where we've lost access to our lands and our families were put into town and then city settings and. It's a huge barrier financially to get out on the land, to learn these things, and even to have a yard in an urban center, that can be a real luxury for a lot of people.

And I feel as though this is one of the biggest reasons why we've lost this knowledge is because we're not there anymore to learn it. And. People in our family who did [00:14:00] grow the garden and who did save the seeds. We're, we're at a point where they, they have aged so much and so many have passed on where it's difficult to even go back and ask for that information and more to get those teachings from our grandparents or great-grandparents because many, many generations now have grown up, not exposed to these things.

I also feel like in some ways, from a very modern perspective, there's, there's institutional barriers to seed saving. And, and we can get into that maybe if there's time where there are places and times where you're actually not allowed to save. And so this creates really interesting circumstance where in some gardening groups, I started a Facebook group for people to trade seeds that they've grown. And some of the first comments in that group [00:15:00] a few years ago was, well, isn't it illegal? And, a) there's this perspective that actually we're not allowed to do this and two, there's the knowledge. So there there's institutional barriers that have been created by a monopoly of seed companies who really want to be the ones doing this thing where it's not really something that's done at the grassroots level, but also where people feel like they're not allowed to do good at the grassroots level. So it's a, there's two factors I think in that.

[00:15:36] **Devonn Drossel:** Right, that's very interesting that multifold, I guess, reasoning behind that is it it's, I've heard stories of mostly related to Issues with genetically modified seeds and Monsanto, and not being able to save certain seeds for legal reasons. And I just, it hadn't occurred to me that that would be something that even on a very small grassroots level, you know, like local [00:16:00] gardeners would be concerned about not being allowed to save seeds. That's so interesting. How, something like that can become such a pervasive, I guess idea, right, that then prevents us from maybe taking something up that we, that we would have otherwise wanted to.

[00:16:15] **Natalie Pepin:** I mean, it's, it starts with those, those genetically modified seeds and, and what we've, what it looks like is a patent on that information, that genetic information, but there's also regulations around who can save seeds to distribute. That there's certain germination standards that are required. And for somebody let's say to go to a gardening event to say, Hey, I've got these great tomato seeds, want to buy a few? That would be illegal because they're not registered as a seed producer. And so I think that's really the one that is more challenging for people, or that is you know, when people were making

these comments of, oh, I don't know if we're allowed to do this [00:17:00] that it's that regulation standard for seed producers to have testing rates and controlled conditions where they're raising the plants for seed. And, you know, on the surface, it makes sense because we don't want people to be buying seed that will never germinate or that won't produce the plant that it says it will. And so having standards make sense. And yet what it's actually done is cut off or made it seem more inaccessible to be saving and trading and selling seeds.

[00:17:34] **Devonn Drossel:** Yeah. It also creates this idea that it's incredibly difficult, right. That it's a very like daunting. The average person can't do that sort of thing, which, you know, as you pointed out a lot of our grandparents and great-grandparents did do it. So I think unlearning that I think is going to be very powerful for a lot of people and. I guess so, so we talk about our, our [00:18:00] grandparents and our great grandparents and the role that seed saving played in their lives. And I wonder if you could just expand on or elaborate a little bit more on what, why seed saving is important to Métis people specifically, and if there's any any specific seeds that you want to, to talk about that have been really important for us as a people. Yeah, I'd be really curious to know more about that.

[00:18:26] **Natalie Pepin:** Absolutely. So the first thing that I want to say there is that this idea that we were hunter gatherers and that we didn't grow, you know, kitchen gardens and things like that for the past couple hundred years is, it's a really interesting notion. It's just not true. It fits this picture of who Métis people are, that is perhaps romanticized, where, you know, we were, we were bison hunters and we were on, on the move [00:19:00] constantly. And this, this notion that we didn't have a home base, that we were always moving, which is of course not true. My family's home base was St. Francois Xavier. That's where we were from. That's where we returned to all the time. And so we had, you know, our homes that were permanent spaces and yes, we traveled and yes, we hunted seasonally and sometimes that was over the summer, but, but we returned home and, and often there would be some who did not come on the hunt. And often there were some of our elders who would stay home and tend the gardens, feed the chickens, you know, stuff like that. And so it's important that we accept and recognize that yeah, we had gardens and we, we saved the seed from those gardens, so we could plant them the following year too. And we put up the food from those gardens. [00:20:00] So that, that notion is important for us to acknowledge first. And then second, from this tradition of having gardens of being close to our food and producing it. Because back in those days, you couldn't just go to a grocery store. You were either wild harvesting your food, or you were growing it. And, and so we had these things.

So when we would be selecting the best seeds from each generation or perhaps there was, you know, that one pea plant that was particular particularly productive and it had the biggest pods and it came so early, we would be watching for these things. And those are the seeds from those plants that would be saved. And so, you know today I've, I've heard people come to my garden and, "oh, look at that tomato! [00:21:00] You're gonna want to eat that one right away!" Where it was like, no, no, that's the tomato I have to save. That's the best to make a garden, and that's why I can't eat it. I have to save it because I want those seeds, because that best tomato is going to produce the *best* seeds for next year. And, and so we went through this process every season where we're watching those plants and seeing how early they come up. And you know, how big is that, that beet, that carrot, those potatoes.

How early did the potatoes come? That's a big one that I watch when I'm checking and watching, it's how early are the potatoes each year? How early are they ready? And, and then eventually I get a feel for, ah, these, this, this crop or these potatoes right here. I want to save these ones for seeds. So I'm going to put them into cold storage and plant them next year. And [00:22:00] so what we did is we developed seeds that were specifically suited, that they had adapted in an ideal way to the places where we lived, because a seed from California or from Ontario, or from South Carolina isn't necessarily going to produce a plant that grows here or that grows *well* here. And so after generations, let's say, you know, 30 years, which is 30 generations in plant world, that we have had plants growing in our winters, or through our winters for perennials. Or, in our short growing seasons for annuals and they're producing and we're selecting the best each generation. Then what we do is we have varieties of plants that are specifically suited to the [00:23:00] environments where we live. And this is again, perennial and annual. So then we have this potential for abundance on the land, where we specifically live. And, culturally, what this means is bounty. It means a really abundant life for our people.

And you know, when I read through journals and accounts from different generations in the past, of course, there's droughts, of course, there are fires, there's things that happen. There's those natural disasters that we still live through today. But, there is also in all of those accounts, this immense connection to food and life revolving around our foods because there's this genetic bank that we have, [00:24:00] wild and what we would call domestic plants, that we have a more stewardship relationship with, that are suited to this place that they can give us a bounty.

So we have this really close relationship over a long period of time with these plants and certain plants become incredibly important. So when we look at accounts from what we, you know, our old ones, our Elders, grandparents, our great-grandparents, there are certain foods that are always mentioned because they're, they're considered more our foods. They're the foods that are part of our culture in a longstanding way. And some of those include potatoes. And it's funny because a lot of people don't realize potatoes are from the Americas. That's where they came from and we had robust trading routes with south, east, [00:25:00] west, and north, incredible trading routes. And that included the trade of things like potatoes, corn, all kinds of foods because many Indigenous cultures were farming cultures. And so potatoes are one of those ones that are mentioned constantly. Yeah. That's, that's our food.

[00:25:20] **Devonn Drossel:** I guess, I guess that's why I love potatoes so much.

[00:25:25] **Natalie Pepin:** Yeah, they've been around for a long time here and then another one, choke cherries, saskatoons, raspberries, you know, a lot of those berries, as you mentioned earlier and these are important culturally, in our foods, they appear often in our dishes that we create.

[00:25:43] **Devonn Drossel:** All right. Well, that's the end of this first episode. If you want to hear the rest of the conversation that Natalie and I had, you can head over to part two of this two-part series, which is going to be the next episode. Thank you so much to Natalie for joining, I'm really grateful that she was [00:26:00] here to share some of her knowledge with us. And I really hope that you all had a good time listening too. This podcast is presented by

the Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research (RCMR), in partnership with the Métis Nation of Alberta and MNA Health.

If you did enjoy the podcast, please consider sharing it with your friends, with your loved ones, your neighbors, anyone that you think might enjoy it. You can head to the show notes for a transcript and any resources that are mentioned. Again, maarsii, kinânaskom'tin, for joining i hope you have a really wonderful day and we will see you back here soon

[00:27:00]