

SYRIAN SEED DISCOVERIES

Our driver edged nervously between crowds of busy shoppers crossing the bus-congested square to Aleppo's oldest food market and home to, I was reliably informed, "the best shop to buy vegetable seeds". It was a dry but chill spring morning in April 2011. In the hills to the south and west makeshift road-blocks and groups of shady characters in leather jackets brandishing Kalashnikov rifles were guarding the roads to Lebanon and the coast, as we had already experienced in our journey through Syria. Yet, within the dusty confines of the market there was no indication of the horrors already starting to unfold in the south of the country and my focus was on tracking down interesting local vegetable seeds.

Ostensibly, my trip to Syria was to visit the sites and meet the locals. But, as with all my travels abroad, I had another interest; to seek out rare, endangered, native and tasty vegetables to grow and savour at home; to add to my library and to share with other like-minded vegaholics. At the time I didn't realise just how important my seed-collecting might turn out to be.

Syria is one of the most bountiful countries in the whole of the Middle East. Much of the land might be desert, but on the richly irrigated plains of the north and on the terraced and beautiful, rolling hills in the west a huge range of food was being grown. For centuries Syria had been famous for its pomegranates and pistachios but many orchards had been grubbed up and neglected during the French occupation in the forties. The country had, until the recent outbreak of civil war, been a major food producer. Syrian fruit and vegetables were exported in huge quantities throughout the Middle East. There was a thriving commercial seed production industry providing locally bred vegetables. In the market in Aleppo I was able to buy a selection of familiar but unique varieties of vegetable seed such as the cucumber, Babylon which was developed as a Mediterranean F1 hybrid; local courgette, various own-brand capsicums and cos-type lettuce. However, what I was really after was the humble broad bean. I wanted to find home-grown heirlooms which have been a staple in Syria for millennia. Earlier I had met the director of the Aleppo state museum, a highly respected archaeologist, who told me that the broad bean was the world's oldest cultivated crop and that he had found evidence of their cultivation in eastern Syria that indicated they were eaten as long as 10,000 years ago. Aleppo was not to yield any heirloom seed that day, just a parking ticket which was easily paid off with a small bribe to the local traffic cop! My search continued.

The first Syrian bean was a large fava that was grown for drying. I often ate a traditional fava bean salad; the fat, meaty beans the size of my thumb, tossed in olive oil and lemon juice and sprinkled with fresh oregano and mint were utterly yummy. The other very familiar sight on the streets of every town we passed through, were great hand barrows piled high with young fresh beans that were eaten whole like a French bean; a popular dish in Syria for centuries. I was keen to find home-saved seed of the variety that had been bred to be best eaten this way.

To the west of the Damascus/Aleppo highway the land is mountainous. Even in spring the peaks were white with snow. We visited the famous Krak des Chevaliers Crusader castle, an imposing site from miles away, straddling a great hilltop like a lumpy stone duvet. The surrounding countryside was undergoing something of a transformation. The long-neglected terraces that tumbled from the tops of the hills into the fertile valleys below were carpeted with spring flowers and new orchards of

apples, pears, almonds, pomegranate, cherries and peach trees. Neat rows of beans and vegetables of every kind were also being grown. Land, that for decades had been left unattended, was being brought back into cultivation. Today those same hills are the front line in Syria's bloody and brutal civil war; the fertile and productive terraces once again abandoned. The fate of the local farmers as uncertain as the survival of their precious horticultural heritage.

Damascus is the oldest city in the world, having been continuously inhabited for over three thousand five hundred years and its Souk is imbued with the city's history. Made up of a maze of narrow alleyways that weave around and between broad covered avenues of shops and stalls, it is a very easy place to get lost in. Every nook and cranny is a centre for some specific product. As I scoured the souk for seeds I found a wonderful man who sold rivets for tool handles. Hard to find at home, this establishment had a huge variety of them in various diameters and lengths, some in boxes I dared not imagine the age of. Needless to say, I filled my pockets and now have sufficient to keep me going into my dotage.

After an hour of searching our driver ushered me into a tiny stall hidden behind bags of dried herbs and spices. On the dimly lit shelves were garden essentials – pots and trays, netting, watering cans, packets of seeds and also some shoe boxes full of various seeds; broad beans, chick-peas, pumpkin, even courgette. Were these commercial varieties being sold loose? Our driver was in animated conversation. No, this was seed from the stall-holder's own smallholding. Yes, there were two types of broad bean – the giant fava and the small one for eating whole. The courgettes were his too. Lovely pale green fruits I was assured. The stall had been in his family for generations and he was as passionate a vegetable grower as me.

The handful of fava beans I brought home has yielded a modest crop for growing on to both eat and share. The plants were tall with short fat pods and not especially prolific, which leads me to believe they probably are a genuine heirloom. I hope that in the next year or so the progeny will be better adapted to British weather and the yield will improve.

As for the small beans, they have proven to be a great success. Now I am growing third generation seed. The compact plants are early and hardy. I sowed late in January in loo-rolls in a cold greenhouse. Hardened off under cloches they are ready for transplanting in early March. The first young beans can be harvested in late May. The mature pods yield very tasty green beans and with a reasonable summer for the crop to dry, a large quantity of seed for the following year.

The heirloom courgette is pale green, early and grows well – at least when the summer is warm! The fruits are delicious, firm and the trailing plants prolific, cropping happily until early September. I hope to grow a crop for seed in 2015.

Tragically the war in Syria could spell the end of its unique vegetable heritage. I am glad that I have at least a few precious varieties to preserve for future generations.