

An Interview with Alan aka Mushroom

Alan M. Kapuler, Ph.D, is one of the founders of Seeds of Change and is retiring this year (2000). His many friends call him Mushroom because, besides being a dedicated seedsman, he also knows a few things about mushrooms. I interviewed him recently at the Seeds of Change research farm in New Mexico. Photography by Scott Vlaun.

~~ Dave Smith

Why should gardeners save their seeds?

One aspect is that you complete cycles. As gardeners, you usually buy the seeds and grow the plants, but you do not complete the cycle. Every year you garden is a year of your life. What do you want to get out of your life, just a bunch of tomatoes? Or do you want to get the generation of seeds that you grow that allow you to keep growing those crops and be able to adapt them to your backyard, and to actually be more mature about what it takes to have it in your own hands...to growing the food. If we are always going to let someone else do it, then we're going to get what we get. What happens routinely is that you get a variety, you like it, you grown it, and after a few years it is no longer being offered! The only way you're going to stop that is to buy ones that you like, grow them, and save your own seeds. So completing the cycle and being more authentically involved seems to me important. The reason we want people to garden is to take it into your own hands, you pick the beans and your tomatoes and your melons and your corn in your own backyard and what have you got? You've got stuff that you grew, you know what happened to it...if someone happened to dump an herbicide on it you would know that because you were there, you could smell it yourself. You are in control more than any other aspect.

And now you have genetically modified organisms, so in the food system processed foods are infiltrated throughout with GMOs, you don't know what happens in the seeds you are getting unless you are doing it yourself. Why do we pass off important things in our lives for other people to do? Gardening allows you to empower yourself.

But isn't it difficult to save seeds and doesn't it take a lot of time?

No, its easy and amazingly productive. Say you grow broccoli. You have 25 broccoli plants and you eat 22 of them. Leave a couple of really nice ones. They flower, then they make seeds. After they make seeds you have a few more things to do. On the leftover plants you then get a green pod that gradually dries out and turns brown. When it splits, you take out the seeds and dry them up, put them on a sheet or in a pan and you knock the seeds out. The fertile seeds roll (as is true of all brassica seeds: cabbage, cauliflower, kale, etc.) And here it is...you get this big cup or more of seeds. (Igot over 480 grams, that's over a pound, from one kale plant!) If you're in a dry climate you can put them out to dry and then put them in a plastic bag and put

them in the shade to cool. Then you store in a dry, cool place. There should be no change in germination for years.

The advantage of doing this is that you have a bag of seeds that you can plant year after year that gives you beautiful broccoli. You've completed the cycle. You can share it with neighbors and it has come out of your own garden with no expenses to deal with.

What about drying for long-term storage in a damp climate like you have in Oregon?

I have a Gardenmaster Food Dehydrator with stackable shelves and a rheostat that allows temperature control. With tomatoes, for instance, where you take the fruits and you squeeze out the juice and you let them sit for a couple of days, let them ferment so the fertile seeds drop to the bottom and catch them on a screen...I put them in the dryer overnight at 95 degrees. I put all the small seeds in it and they are dried well. Then I store them in plastic bags in the dark and they're stable...good for years.

I use the drier so I can dry different kinds in the same drier operation. The rule of thumb is 95 degrees overnight. With larger seeds, like squash seeds, I leave them in for 2 days.

If you like certain crops, like tomatoes, you can grow hundreds of kinds. Then you find there are one or two unusual plants. If you want to grow unusual plants then you DO need to save seeds because then you have the option of using your own intelligence and your own taste to select out what you grow. If we don't want the gene pool-which is the structure of the diversity of what is available to us in the world-to be dictated to us by a few organizations that supply us seeds, then we have to be involved in saving them. It is a critical political and socially responsible activity. It's not just "why save seeds", but rather about control of our lives. If you want to have more freedom, then you need to take it upon yourself to sponsor more freedom.

As the new systems of trade grow and things are shipped over long distances, there is the possibility that we are going to have that fabric uncoupled sometime, whether it is uncoupled because sun flares deactivate the computers or the petroleum supplies get diminished...whatever it is, the best food you get is locally grown and in season. But all that is relevant to a socio-political transformation in our society. Good gardening gets you into a place where you feel good about your life and maybe that time is more important to your life than a lot of other things you do.

So the gardening and the seed saving combined give a wholistic aspect to it.

What has working with seeds all these years done for you spiritually?

It means the core of an integral life. It's a life in which you are in rapport with the biosphere. Most of us, because of the way we live, don't have much time to be involved with the earth...natural cycles. It gets you in touch...you're in the ground, in the earth...in relationships with how things grow. Usually you don't pay attention to how things grow. You have to pay attention or you don't get anything out of it. All of a sudden you're interacting with the basic pure source of biology, and biology has been severely diminished by mathematics and chemistry and physics. Yet the core is biology. So if you want to be healthy and have a future, gardening is the core of that. Diversity is disappearing in this world at colossal speed. Maybe when you first start gardening you don't recognize it and you think there are only three types of tomatoes. After you garden for awhile, you realize there are three thousand types of tomatoes. Then you hit the tomato genera and you realize there are another ten of those. Then you hit the tomato family and realize there are thousands of species and another 90 genera you knew nothing about. So you get increasingly into level upon level of the depth and profundity of the earth's fertility. You begin to find out the earth is sacred and we really need to treasure that sacredness and build spiritual character so that life can go on. We are failing in this world because we do not give enough recognition and respect...and respond to the whole integrated fact that the biosphere supports us, that we are just a part of it. We would like to believe that we can exist independent of it and we are destroying it.

Seed saving is the core of gardening. That is the basic thing that allows the cycle, generation after generation after generation. You take the same thing with human beings. If you don't have any kids and people grow older without any kids around, what have you got? A heartless society that doesn't work. It's all about the young ones, the fertility of generations, growing old, nurturing generation after generation. Loving what is growing and alive...being tickled by diversity and variety and the beauty involved in these aspects of being alive. Without that, we're missing the point and missing our lives.

You are a scientist and science is a big reason why we are losing diversity and value.

Science is a cult, the ruling cult of the intelligentsia of this world. And I believe that science is in some ways the Trojan horse as well as the club. Science says that you can do this or not do this because we understand it. But the really deep things we don't understand. So science has a small purvey but we like to give it a huge scope. Science is way overvalued in this society because of its ability to influence people's decision-making process to decide "this is important, that is not important, this you understand, this you don't understand", and this whole rational, reductionist dialectic that runs through all atheistic materialism to browbeat everybody to believe that this is how it is and that is ALL there is. So I believe that science is way over-rated, way over emphasized.

And spirituality, this whole set of intangibles, real things about how you feel, how you love, what you see...all the things that make you sensitive and make you interested-those things science values very little because everything in science has

to be reproducible, rational. And yet, if you think life is rational, check it out again. If you think creation is rational, check it out again. And as an example of how irrational creation is, just look at where you are, look at the horizon sitting still, and you know the earth is spinning and the whole planet is spinning though the cosmos, and it all looks one way but it is all another.

There are much more important things such as how well we communicate, how well we get along. Why don't we share this world instead on making all these decisions and fighting it out, saying "this is your, and this is mine, we own this and you own that." Where do we end up? Do we have anyone to love, anyone to talk to? Well, not many. We have a large bank book and really not much content.

Same with economics. Unending growth is a metaphysical sickness because it says you have a child, then you have two children, then three and four, and then 10 and 20. Somewhere along the way you no longer take care of those children. You don't have the time, the energy, the resources to feed the children, so they grow up to be considerate, insightful...all those deep, necessary parts of the society. You miss that point if you have too many, rather than figuring out how to have dynamic space with inputs and changes within a basic stability pattern that allows everyone to be taken care of. This is what we have to work towards in the population of the world. Unending growth is a misunderstanding of the whole fabric of life and how this thing is built. We have to have better awareness of what the forces are in our system. What we call free enterprise has been taken as license to destroy the biosphere. That's not socially just.

Our economic system is a failure because a lot of people don't have a chance to get an education...they can't afford it. An affluent nation like the United States should give everyone a free education through graduate school so you can serve the community with the best abilities and you fertilize the ground with deep loving people to relate to in our society. That's what we need. We don't need more military, more weapons, more bombs, more fences, more poisons...we need to have more cooperation and more sharing of the goodness that we really hold.

What do you suggest we do to change that?

Garden. Begin to take into our own hands the basic structure of growing our own food. One needs to investigate spirituality with a broad view. One needs to recognize that there are deep needs that we have that are not satisfied on the physical plane. We need love, understanding, cooperation. We need activities that are inspiring. We need work that has deep meaning, that allows you to cooperate with the wealth of your neighborhood, your community, your family, with humanity generally.

You know, death gets us eventually, and when you look back after you're dead, you say "What did I do with my life?" When your kids are adults and come back to you and say "Thank you for taking the time taking walks with me, doing projects with

me, sharing interests," you realize it was worth the time loving your kids more than it was doing a whole lot of other things you think are so important.

What does that tiny little seed you hold in your hand mean to you...that seed that has life in it and can produce something large.

It's a miracle to me! I have a handful of tree seeds here in the palm of my hand, which are going to be these colossal plants. I have a redwood seed in my hand...it's a huge tree. Can you believe it? You plant the seed and thirty years later you've got this immense tree. Uncanny! The longer I live, the most amazing thing are the big trees. Creatures live in them in all categories, from the top to the bottom. They provide shelter and food and the wherewithal that makes life worthwhile.

Do you have a spiritual practice after gardening?

I practice yoga. I have done breathing exercises every morning for twenty-five years. Yoga is only part of the practice having to do with God-consciousness, self-realization. I find that I would like to cooperate with everybody who works for peace and love in this world....whatever their discipline of doctrine. I accept Muslims, Jews, Christians. Hindus, Buddhists, every sect and every religion, every avatar, every saint, every holy person who has ever cared for peace on earth. I love them dearly. They're my friends and my guides, they're my teachers and my children.

We are one unity that can be divided in a lot of ways, but when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, we are all one.