

We constantly hear about all kinds of “banks” today that are not financial banks. Banks for sperm, banks for eggs, banks for DNA; but we also have banks to store plant genetics called germplasm banks. After the great Irish potato famine, the United States Congress authorized the US Department of Agriculture and the Agricultural Research Service to establish a bank of plant germplasm in the form of seeds, bulbs, etc. to keep every kind of seed imaginable.

Especially important was all types of seeds for our staple crops like corn, wheat and soybeans and food crops. Seeds were gathered from cultivated as well as wild varieties from all over the world and stored in great temperature, light and humidity controlled vaults.

The theory is that if a disease or natural calamity of insects attack and destroy a monoculture of our food crops, we can go back to the back and genetically breed crops resistant to the attacking plague.

In sync with that theory, a new genebank for ornamental crops has been established which will help ensure a bright future for floral and nursery plants that make colorful, fragrant bouquets or beautify backyard gardens and other landscapes. Located at The Ohio State University, Columbus, the Ornamental Plant

Germplasm Center is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's nationwide network of plant repositories. Each genebank is somewhat like a Ft. Knox for plants, where germplasm-- seeds, bulbs, and other living tissue—is safeguarded, according to David Tay, director of the new center. You can find more information about on the Center Web site at: <http://hcs.osu.edu/opgc>.

Without genebanks, genes that confer valuable traits such as natural resistance to insects or disease can be lost when plants that are popular today are replaced by newer, trendier varieties. That's why genebanks preserve wild relatives of domesticated crops, as well as older, heirloom varieties no longer grown commercially. It is for this reason that the simple, short, plain sunflower down in Randolph county called Schweinitz's sunflower on Mountain View Church Road is so important to mankind.

Begun under an agreement with The Ohio State University in 1999, the center for ornamental plants is the only one in the National Plant Germplasm System (ARS) to specialize exclusively in herbaceous ornamental plants. Plant breeders can use germplasm that will be housed at the new genebank to develop attractive new plants.

These new varieties may, for example, require less water, fertilizer, or pesticides than plants available at nurseries today. The center is responsible for not only maintaining healthy, vigorous plants and seeds but also for continuously building the collection--either through exchanges or plant-collecting expeditions--and for producing new and improved techniques for long-term conservation. Ornamental horticulture is Guilford County's largest agricultural crop estimated at \$17 million income to producers and landscapers.

Members of the nation's \$12 billion floral and nursery crops industry actively support the new repository and were among those attending its July 14 grand opening. The new genebank includes a 6,000-square-foot office and laboratory building at 670 Tharp St., Columbus, and an adjacent 11,500-square-foot greenhouse.

A future column will cover the mission and activities of the Seedsaver Exchange, which is a grassroots effort by ordinary citizens to save, share and spread the use of heirloom varieties of food and fiber plants. This year, from this group, I planted 'Chicken Gizzard' green pole beans, which I am cultivating to build more seed. I will let you know what happens.