



# Growing Your Food from Baladi Seeds



By Morgan Cooper

**“I** was born into a falahee (peasant) family that grew grapes, plums, almonds, and olives. Our family raised cows and goats, and we used their manure as fertilizer. In the summers, we planted tomatoes, faqous (Armenian cucumber), okra, gourds, all the summer crops. We grew the vegetables without watering them; this is called bayal and typical for baladi (literally “my country”) seeds. My mother was the one who planted. When she harvested the tomatoes, she took the seeds and kept them in ashes to dry them for the following year. Today, it’s hard to find baladi seeds. I plant veggies in my garden in the summers, and I have to search for seeds. I have a small garden next to my kitchen where I plant a bit of parsley, a few tomatoes, some faqous. Just for my house. I plant and don’t water because the baladi seeds don’t need water. It’s best to grow my own vegetables because if I buy them from the market, we don’t know where the vegetables are from. I don’t know what they use to water them. Maybe, they watered with sewage. Maybe, they had pigs in the garden. I grow so I can eat.” Dalal, Beit Duqqu

Our Palestinian ancestors were the keepers of traditional knowledge. For too long, many of us have silenced them and replaced their knowledge with our modern learning. I think there is a place and value for both. In terms of cuisine, we are returning to the knowledge that local, seasonal produce is more suited for our bodies, that pesticides, chemicals, and modern production techniques harm nutrients. We see a revival, or celebration if you will, of traditional Palestinian knowledge both in our agricultural methods and in our kitchens – for the two are intricately linked. Healthy, nourishing food starts with the right ingredients. And nothing makes a dish more nutrient dense and tastier than using seasonal, organic vegetables, grown without pesticides or chemical fertilizers, especially if they are freshly harvested and local.

Ten years ago, I began to plant my own vegetable garden in the small plot around our house. We wanted to grow produce we would feel happy and comfortable to eat and use in our restaurant downstairs. When my husband and I wanted to have more soil to increase our harvest, we looked up and decided to build a rooftop garden. But also, we wanted



Um Sliman Farms Seed Collection

to grow the best quality products, free of any chemicals or genetic modification. Back then, it was nearly impossible to find *baladi* seeds, while local shops offered mostly genetically modified (GMO) seeds. Initially, we thus brought heirloom seeds from abroad to grow what we needed in our garden and on our rooftop. On land we own just outside of Ramallah, we built hugelkultur beds and sowed the seeds there as well. But we never gave



From Canaan Farm.

up our search for *baladi* seeds and eventually found them in different places locally. We found that the plants we grew from these seeds did so well that we saved their seeds and replanted them the next year.

Today, I find it easier to source *baladi* seeds and produce. While our Ramallah/Al-Bireh *hisbeh* (vegetable market) is flooded with low-grade, pesticide-laden Israeli produce, it is also common knowledge that in the summers, the *faqous*, *baladi* tomatoes, and cucumbers are likely local and pesticide free. That's because they grow well in our climate. So what is *baladi*? It's basically the heirloom varieties that are not genetically modified, the ones that traditionally thrived in our soils with little to no water. That doesn't mean that vegetables grown from *baladi* seeds are native to Palestine. Corn and tomatoes originally came from the Americas, but the original species did so well locally that they became heirloom to Palestine, *baladi*.

That *baladi* seeds can be more easily sourced today is evidence that there is a growing number of people who value, save, and share these species' seeds. You can find ancient grains and *baladi* seeds at Canaan Fair Trade company in Jenin, the Union for Agricultural Workers Committee, the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library, Om Sliman's farm, or with any number of *falaheen* around Palestine.

Since COVID-19 lockdowns began in March 2020, many young people, such as my friend Majdi Habash, have returned to the land of their ancestors and learned traditional farming. Regenerating the soil in the garden around his grandmother's home as part of an initiative they named Im Odeh Agrogarden, Majdi and his friends sourced and planted *baladi* seeds. When I asked them why they started the project, he explained, "I was plagued by the question of why people have left their lands. Why was this heavenly piece of land abandoned for more

than two decades? It's fertile, with lots of trees and a well. This is wealth, but the way people see wealth today is different. I can use this soil and water to grow produce and build up our community." He went on to tell me about his mentors and the cooperatives they visited to exchange knowledge and share seeds, such as Saleh Totah with Mashjar Juthour, Al Fallah, and Om Sliman.

They are not alone in this trend. I asked Fareed Taamallah from Sharaka, a community that supports small farmers and hosts an annual farmers' market in Al-Bireh, whether he noticed more small farmers growing *baladi* and relying on traditional farming techniques. He answered with an enthusiastic "Yes!" He believes that this increase is "partly due to more awareness of the importance of farming" and partly from what I'll call the COVID turn towards a greener life.

I also see a growing trend with projects such as Al-Falah in Kafr Ni'ma, Ras Karkar Cooperative, Al-Mazraa, and Al-Darb. These initiatives, as well as community-supported agriculture (CSA) stores and shops that sell *baladi* produce (Canaan Organic Farm in Jenin, Om Sliman Farm in Tulkarem, Farfakheena in Surda-Ramallah, and Khadra and Adel markets in Ramallah) testify to an increasing base of consumers who demand to know where and how their food is grown. They reject the GMO, chemical-saturated produce of the *hisbeh*. Om Sliman has expanded from 8 subscribers to their weekly boxes in 2016 to 20 subscribers in 2021, and to 40 subscribers this season. This may seem like natural

From Um Odeh Agrogarden.



From Canaan Farm.

growth, as increasing numbers of people know about their weekly subscription box service. But when one considers that since the inception of Om Sliman, many other projects have popped up to offer similar produce and services, we realize that there is genuinely greater interest in food sovereignty and *baladi* produce.

For many of us, this has been the result of a personal journey, whether as consumers or growers – or both! Saleh Totah (my husband) has played with different kinds of planting areas from raised beds to hugelkultur to find ways of growing vegetables on the mountainside where no water is available. This

exploration in traditional agriculture became increasingly urgent when we had children and he wanted to provide clean produce for our family to consume. Today, many people come to him for *baladi* seeds, after he has spent years searching for and then saving them. He and many others have become keepers of these precious seeds and traditional knowledge. Vivien Sansour stands out as a pioneer in collecting and saving our precious *baladi* seeds with her Heirloom Seed Library in Battir.

Karmel Abufarha from Canaan Fair Trade moved to Palestine in 2013 to join his father in the family business. When I met him five years ago, he

was passionate about real food and traditional agriculture. We connected at my restaurant over the stories I had written on the menu about traditional agricultural values. In the years since, he has embarked on a personal quest to learn and implement traditional agricultural practices in his own journey towards sustainable living. As he explained, and as many of the projects discussed in this article practice, organic polyculture vegetable production and traditional agricultural practices are key to regenerative farming and to building a resilient food system. His personal journey to access clean, heirloom grains, vegetables, and fruits is part of a longer genealogy of Canaan's efforts, as Karmel articulates, "to build sustainable food production systems that maintain the integrity of our traditions and ancient wisdom." Karmel and Nasser Abufarha, his visionary father, consider Palestinian traditional agricultural practices as solutions that can lead to a resilient food system and a sustainable society.

And they are not alone. It is a growing, shared belief in the need for sustainability that leads many of us back to the traditional knowledge of Palestinian society: *baladi* seeds, ancient farming techniques, and cleaner eating.

COVID-19 lockdowns seem to have exponentially boosted our collective thinking on this subject. Certainly, that has been the case in Palestine. People around the world began gardening indoors, on rooftops, on plots, or family lands, and

we are no exception to this trend. As Yara Dowani from Om Sliman attests, the customer demand for organic local produce is ever growing. And I argue that this is the direct result of our shifting awareness and sense of responsibility towards self, family, community, and land. While the shift is surely motivated by an increasing awareness of our own personal health (the old saying "you are what you eat" comes to mind), it is also informed by our ever-increasing awareness of and sense of responsibility towards environmental degradation caused by pollution, the use of chemicals, and our greedy consumption.

Personally, when I found out that I was pregnant with my first child, clean eating wasn't just about what I was putting into my and my baby's bodies. I couldn't



From Mashjar Juthour.



From Um Odeh Agrograden.

stop thinking about his future and the world in which he would come of age. It terrified me. My husband and I embarked upon implementing our extreme and immediate environmental consciousness. We began growing everything we could so we would know (as Dalal articulated) where our food came from. We cut our waste down to one small bag a week. We decided that we wanted a core value for our children to be sustainability, and the best way to teach that was to live it. My five-year-old can talk to you about *baladi* seeds, the practice of saving and planting those seeds, how to build and regenerate soil, and why this is so important. And he is not the only child in our community in Ramallah who can articulate those values.

This increasing thoughtfulness and appreciation gives us hope. It is not just about seeds and farming. Our relationship to this land is at

the heart of Palestinian cuisine. Our dishes were created by ancestors who harvested *baladi* produce and explored the myriad of flavors made possible by our local agriculture. In Palestine, we are beginning, I hope, to come full circle: from traditional knowledge to the crisis of modernity, we begin our return to the values and knowledge of our ancestors so that they may guide us towards a sustainable country and Earth.

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