GROW SEED ON CONTRACT

CASE STUDY
SEED BUYER / CONTRACT GROWER

DAN BRISEBOIS
TOURNE-SOL FARM

LES CÈDRES, QUEBEC

APRIL 2018

BCSEEDS.ORG

FARM FOLK CITY FOLK

THE BAUTA FAMILY INITIATIVE ON CANADIAN SEED SECURITY

Vancity

BC SEED

FarmFolk CityFolk, BC Seed Security Program

Since 1993, FarmFolk CityFolk has been working to cultivate a local, sustainable food system. Our projects support local growers and producers, engage communities in the celebration of local food, provide access to and protection of foodlands, and strengthen the seed sector.

For over 10 years we have been working closely with vegetable seed growers and seed companies across BC and are a regional partner for the Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security. We deliver workshops, field days and conduct research with a long-term vision of a thriving ecological seed sector in BC that produces high-quality seed crops at a commercial scale.

We believe in collaboration and are working with a wide range of partners from farmers to educational institutions to advance the ecological, economic, and community aspects of seed production.

Collaborators include the University of British Columbia, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, the University of the Fraser Valley and a network of farmers across BC and Canada.

www.BCSeeds.org

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Dan Brisebois began growing seed about 15 years ago and his seed business has developed in tandem with the cooperative farm he founded and runs with four partners in Quebec, la ferme coopérative Tourne-Sol, an hour outside of Montreal in Les Cèdres, Quebec.

GETTING STARTED

Tourne-Sol Cooperative Farm got started in commercial seed production by growing seed for other Canadian certified organic seed companies. Tourne-Sol later started their own seed company selling branded seed packets directly to gardeners and farmers through online, Seedy Saturday and retail sales. Dan sees an opportunity for more farmers to add seed production to their farm enterprise.

THE TOURNE-SOL MODEL

The Tourne-Sol seed company provides certified organic, open-pollinated seeds:
- 70% of varieties are grown at Tourne-Sol
- 10% are grown by local farmers (many whom are past Tourne-Sol apprentices!)
- 20% come from growers in other regions and wholesale suppliers.

In addition to packet sales, Tourne-Sol continues to grow and sell seed through contracts to other seed companies in Canada and one US seed company.

Top Photo
Dan Brisebois at Tourne-Sol Farm

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Bottom Photo
Seed crop in bloom

"AS THE TOURNE-SOL START-UP BUSINESS PLAN WAS EVOLVING, I WENT TO THE GUELPH ORGANIC CONFERENCE.

I WANTED TO CATCH THE ANNUAL ARRAY OF SPEAKERS BUT I ALSO HAD ULTERIOR MOTIVES -

WORKING THE TRADE SHOW TO TALK TO SEED COMPANIES ABOUT GROWING SEED FOR THEM."

SEED GROWER RELATIONSHIPS

Over the years Tourne-Sol has developed strong relationships with the farmers that grow seed for them, but they are always on the look-out for new seed growers who are skilled in seed production and can reliably deliver seed. Reliability, being able to deliver the agreed upon amount and quality of seed, is the most important factor for good seed contract relationships. When new seed companies focusing on certified organic packet sales emerge Tourne-Sol will approach them to see if they are interested in selling bulk volumes of seed on contract.

"THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE WITH NEW SEED GROWERS IS RELIABILITY.

IF SOMEONE CAN RELIABLY DELIVER QUALITY SEED THAT IS A SUCCESS AND I KNOW WE CAN BUILD ON THAT RELATIONSHIP."

Tourne-Sol will start new contract growers with smaller amounts of seed varieties they know they can get elsewhere, and once the grower has proven their reliability they will increase the volumes requested. A typical new grower contract would be for $200 - $500 of bean, pea or annual brassica seed. If that went well then larger volumes of seed and more challenging seed crops would be considered. A larger contract would range from $1,000 - $2,000 currently, but this value could increase as the Tourne-Sol seed company continues to grow in volume and revenue.

Dan Brisebois, cleaning seed

Specific training or years of experience growing seed are not necessarily requirements, proving reliability and attention to quality are the most important factors.

Once the contract is set Dan will check in with growers by email throughout the season to ensure things are going smoothly and to field questions. With a long standing blog on seed growing - goingtoseed.wordpress.com - Dan is often able to point people to past blog posts that address the challenges a grower is facing.

To increase the amount of technical support he can offer, Dan is working on developing seed crop production guides and is considering holding a one-day intensive seed production field school at his farm. This type of hands-on support and commitment to building skills among contract growers is unique to small and medium sized seed companies. Larger seed companies are likely to expect that contract growers seek agronomic support from other institutions or experts.

Quality is a number one priority. With that in mind, Tourne-Sol is very specific about their expectations.

MANAGEMENT & QUALITY ASSURANCE EXPECTATIONS

	TOURNE-SOL	CONTRACT GROWER
ISOLATION DISTANCE	Provides recommendations	Follows recommendations
POPULATION SIZES	Provides recommendations	Follows recommendations
ROGUING	Provides recommendations	Follows recommendations
TECHNICAL SUPPORT	Provides guidance/support	Can receive support from co.
SEED CLEANING	Able to do final cleaning	Must do majority of cleaning
SEED SAMPLE	Request sample after harvest	Send sample immediately
GERMINATION TEST	Perform in-house	Recommend before shipping
PURITY TEST	Not required	Not required
PACKING	Packs seed in-house	Ship bulk seed
CERTIFICATIONS	Certified organic to COR	Must be COR certified
GROWING PRACTICES	All seed certified organic	Canada Organic standards

Over the years Tourne-Sol's approach has evolved to better anticipate when there might be quality assurance issues to avoid a last minute scramble to find alternative sources for seed where the quality is too poor to sell, or quantities were not what was expected.

They have begun to ask for a sample of seed as soon as it is harvested so they can do a germination test right away. They encourage contract growers to do their own germination testing to better understand the quality of seed they are producing. To avoid late delivery of seed Tourne-Sol is considering offering a bonus for early delivery. This is an approach that other seed companies take to ensure cleaning and final delivery is completed on time.

Cleaned beet seed

CROPS AND PRICING

Tourne-Sol starts new contract growers off with easier-to-grow crops and small volumes. Once a contractor has proven their reliability they will be offered more profitable varieties and larger volumes. Factors that can affect seed pricing include:

- If the crop or variety is rare or difficult to grow;
- The volume being sold, volumes in the range of 50-100 kg would be purchased at a lower price/ kg.

Tourne-Sol is interested in new varieties, but their focus is on providing a curated collection of high performing varieties. Local growers able to grow seed crops that are difficult to grow in their region, such as carrots and beets, could receive a higher price that recognizes the skill involved. There is a limit to how much the seed can be sold for so there is a limit on what contract growers can be paid. Overall, Tourne-Sol is working to make their pricing more transparent to contract growers and to better explain the costs of marketing and packing seed.

Tourne-Sol estimates that a grower could make $30,000 to $50,000 per acre by growing seed on contract with a reasonable amount of skill and effort. However, it may be difficult to find markets for that volume of seed, which makes building relationships with seed companies over time and proving reliability all the more important.

"A GROWER COULD MAKE $30,000 TO $50,000 PER ACRE BY GROWING SEED ON CONTRACT WITH A REASONABLE AMOUNT OF SKILL AND EFFORT."

Top Photo
Leek seed crop at Tourne-Sol Farm

Bottom Photo
Carrot at seed stage

MARKET DEMAND AND LIMITATIONS

Tourne-Sol sees demand for locally grown seed growing. As a regionally focused company, a limiting factor is what grows well in the area. The number and quality of open-pollinated varieties is also a limiting factor. Home gardeners trust in and support local, open-pollinated seed, but commercial vegetable growers are largely dependent on hybrids. Tourne-Sol estimates about 10-15% of a market grower's needs can be met by seed that can be grown within his bioregion and perform well.

Building trust in local seed quality and being able to offer high performing open-pollinated varieties is an important step to further building regional seed systems and expanding the seed market.

"BUILDING TRUST IN LOCAL SEED QUALITY AND BEING ABLE TO OFFER HIGH PERFORMING OPEN-POLLINATED VARIETIES IS AN IMPORTANT STEP TO FURTHER BUILDING REGIONAL SEED SYSTEMS AND EXPANDING THE SEED MARKET."

MORE INFORMATION

Find out more about Tourne-Sol Cooperative Farm:
fermetournesol.qc.ca

View all of our seed business resources:
bcseeds.org/business-resources

Tourne-Sol Farm delivery van