



SEEDHEADS TRANSCRIPT

Episode 4: TIFFANY TRAVERSE English

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Steph Benoit

Hey, welcome to SeedHeads, the cross-pollinating podcast where our Canadian seed heroes, tell their stories, share their how-to tips, and talk about the seeds they love. I'm your host, Steph Benoit, coming to you from Vancouver, BC, on the unceded and ancestral territories of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Selilwítlh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

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Steph Benoit

For today's episode, I had the great joy and honour of talking to Tiffany Traverse, an Indigenous seed and land steward. Tiffany grew up on her great grandparents' homestead, on her peoples' traditional Secwépemc territory in the Columbia Valley. She now lives on Fourth Sister Farm in the Peace Region of BC, on so-called Treaty 8 territory, homeland of the Dunne-Za (de-ney-za) Peoples. The land she tends is also a home base for her ongoing exploration of the relationships between seed and heritage, history and self.

It seems Tiffany is always up to something. She keeps horses, grows food, promotes wildfire prevention and emergency preparedness, and is passionate

about community-led research. In addition to her day job and the time spent on her own farm, Tiffany serves as a volunteer Advisory Council Member with The Community Seed Network and has participated in numerous participatory plant breeding and variety trialing projects.

In our conversation, Tiffany talked about the importance of mentors, the power of reverent curiosity, and chatted about her experience exploring her ancestry through seeds. Tiffany is a gifted storyteller with a passion for seeds that is energizing to listen to. This conversation felt very timely and hopeful amidst all the change 2020 has brought. I am very excited to be able to share it with you. I hope you enjoy.

Hey Tiffany, how are you? Thank you so much for joining me today.

Tiffany Traverse

Hi Steph, it's really good to see you. I'm glad to talk with you today.

Steph Benoit

When we were throwing around this idea of having a podcast with Canadian seed heroes and having these young people getting into the seed world interview their seed heroes, you were someone who I initially and immediately thought of wanting to talk to because of your immense passion and also your, sort of, omnipresence in the BC seed world. You were popping up in everything. And seeing how much energy you bring into this and, sort of, the passion really made me want to talk more with you. So, thank you so much for making this time today; it really does feel like a privilege to me.

I wanted to ask you a little bit about where your relationships with seeds began.

Tiffany Traverse

Yeah. I mean, I think my relationship with seeds began when I was just a little girl. You know, I remember growing up on my great-grandparent's original homestead along the Columbia River. I always would find myself, you know, crinkling yarrow seed between my hands, out in the woods. And I just love that tactile feeling of seed, and I never realized, you know, hey, I'm actually broadcasting, you know, native species of seed at that very young age. And, you know, being away from land for so long, I didn't realize the importance of seed to me personally until I had the privilege of coming back onto land up in

the Peace Region. And, yeah, once we came onto this property, I just started putting seed in the ground, and things really took off from there.

Steph Benoit

So, you've got a farm now or a piece of land that you're on, and it's got a really unique name, and I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about the story behind your farm.

Tiffany Traverse

Yeah, so we call the farm here Fourth Sister Farm, and it has dual meanings. So, I mean, a lot of us are familiar with the planting methodology of the three sisters or Milpa, and that is the story of the Three Sisters that work in conjunction with each other. You know you have your sister corn who grows nice and tall and acts as a trellis for sister bean; and sister bean, in turn, fixes nitrogen into the ground to help feed sister corn and sister squash; and sister squash acts as like a natural ground cover to block out weeds and hold in moisture. And this has been a timeless method that has been used by Indigenous peoples for many, many years, and is still used to this day. I really felt that to honour that and my Indigenous roots, I wanted to, you know, pay homage to that, being that, you know, with my Secwépemc roots, we are very fierce land and water stewards and protectors. And I really felt like my work here that I'm doing on the farm is acting as that fourth sister. But also, I like to pay some respect to my great-grandmother, Elder Shelagh Palmer Kinbasket Dehart; a beautiful human being, amazing storyteller, and just, she really put that love of nature and giving back to the land, you know, she really instilled that in me. And she happened to be the fourth sister of seven sisters; you know, residential school survivors, definitely very resilient women. And yeah, I really just wanted to pay respect to her and her resiliency. And she went on to become this incredible storyteller, and I really admired that, and, you know, I wanted to live up to that storytelling abilities. So, yeah, it's paying, just paying some respects to Great-Grandma Shelagh.

Steph Benoit

And talking about very powerful matriarchs as well, for me as a young, you know, female-identifying seed saver, it's been so powerful to see women at the forefront of this movement. I was wondering if you could speak a bit to the importance of having mentors in the seed community.

Tiffany Traverse

Definitely, I think mentors, they come in many different shapes and sizes, and they come into our lives, I find, at the most appropriate times. I have many mentors. I'm actually finding myself becoming a mentor without even realizing it. You know, people are reaching out to me for information and for advice, and I never thought, I still consider myself as, you know, a baby seed steward, you know, I still have so much to learn. I'm fumbling around trying to figure stuff out, but I guess just in doing the work, you know, people see that, and they're wanting to ask, you know, say, "How do I do this?" you know, "How do I hand-pollinate squash," or "How do I thresh seed?" And I just, I love to be able to share those resources with people. I think it's so important to have people fall in love again with their food, and know where their food comes from and their seed comes from, and really just respecting and loving the land. And that's a big part of the other side of my passion work that I do as well is definitely having these, sort of, tougher conversations on how can we reframe our language around these systems that have, for many years, negatively impacted many different peoples, but, you know, especially Indigenous and people of colour. Like, these systems have definitely oppressed a lot of those types of groups. And yeah, I just find that language can hold so much power and so much energy. So yeah, I've been having some pretty uncomfortable conversations with people, but I love that. I kind of revel in having these uncomfy conversations and in safe spaces, but, you know, these are conversations that have needed to happen for a really, really long time. And, yeah, I've met some really amazing people along the way in doing that work.

Steph Benoit

Yeah, you've talked about having a few really important mentors along the way as well. Do you want to talk about these people that have influenced you along the way?

Tiffany Traverse

You know, being given a platform like this, yes, I can talk about the important work that I'm doing myself, but I really think this is an opportunity for me to give thanks and honour and uplift the people that have really influenced and inspired me along the way. And, it's actually really interesting, you know, I started taking Rowen White's Seed Seva online mentorship a couple of years ago, and, you know, we start talking about healing through food and, you know, finding our own ancestral seeds and foodways and talking about Indigenous plant breeding and ethical seed sourcing and all these different

things. And it was just like boom, like everything just exploded for me, and I started going down these rabbit holes of trying to find myself and heal myself as well. There's a lot of healing to be done.

And, so Rowen herself, she's been this amazing mentor to me. I consider her a dear sister. She weaves beautiful stories in everything that she does, and I love her dearly. She's definitely helped guide me along the way. But in that work that I was doing with Rowen, you know, we're trying to find our own seed pathways, and, you know, I started looking around, poking around the internet. And, I actually found Caroline Chartrand's story with, at the time it was USC, but SeedChange now and she was telling this beautiful story about what her Métis People's were growing and eating along the Red River, you know, way, way back when they actually still had access to their land. Like they were forced from their land and still don't have access to land. So, she was looking for her foodways and her seeds, and I saw her story, and I was like, wow, I just need to know this woman.

She's amazing, the amount of work that she's done. And, obviously, you know, urban Indigenous Métis woman living in so-called Winnipeg and really just struggling to find access to land and still doing this really important work of saving seed and adapting it and just protecting these beautiful seeds of her people. So I reached out to USC and said, "Hey, like I can't find Caroline's information anywhere. I would really love to chat with her," and, you know, a little bit of back and forth to make sure it was okay because of course, she's quite a private person, but she was open to talking to me. And it just, it started this beautiful relationship. Her and I talk at least weekly, sometimes more; I'll send her photos every now and then. Yeah, we've gone on to present at the Indigenous Farming Conference in Minnesota just on the work that we're doing with, what we could call, say, like, seed collection succession planning and ways that I'm helping her steward this immense collection of seeds that she's been caretaking for so long. But now, you know, she's doesn't have access to land, you know, the seeds aren't getting any younger. So, I basically told her I would help her do the work that needs to be done. And, so, yes, we've exchanged seeds. I'm caretaking for quite a few of her varieties here, on our little chunk of paradise.

And, yeah, she's guiding me all along the way, telling me when I'm doing stuff wrong and then congratulating me when I'm doing things right. And I just love to send her photos of these beautiful Indigenous squash and all these beans that are doing really well. So, yeah, she's one of my dear mentors,

Caroline for sure, Caroline and Rowen. And, you know, more and more mentors and aunties, as I call them, start coming out, you know, these beautiful women that are on the front lines of doing this important work.

You know, I look at Dawn Morrison; she's, you know, my Secwépemc sister, my Secwépemc Auntie. I love her so much, and she's doing such incredible work in dismantling a lot of these or doing the work to try to dismantle a lot of these very oppressive systems and reframing language in institutions and academia; and she's been doing that work for a very, very long time.

So, through her work with the Working Group for Indigenous Food Sovereignty as well as the Food Freedom School that she has as well in Vancouver and Chase, she's doing remarkable work with a very large cohort of people from all over so-called BC. And, I, you know, I've reached out to her to offer any help and energy I can to, sort of, her initiatives. And, yeah, it's been wonderful, you know, I try and check in with them every so often; I'm sharing seeds and medicines with them because I know that they're doing that really hard, laborious work that definitely is very draining. So, I try and give my energy to them wherever I can. So, yeah, those are three of my, probably, very dear mentors.

I mean, not to mention, obviously, my great-grandma. Shelagh's no longer with us. And then my Auntie Dusty, who has been teaching me some of our Secwépemc ways as well. You know, she taught me how to, the way she was taught how to smudge and, you know, just learning, you know, relearning our ceremonies and our traditions and trying to keep those alive; which I think is very, very important for the next generations.

Steph Benoit

It's amazing, too, when you start talking about seed heroes; it's an ever-expanding thing. You know, once you find one person, and then you find a next, and you realize that there have been so many people who have been stewarding seeds and taking care of the land for so long. So, a few times that I've seen you, you know, pop into webinars or speak, you've used the phrase "reverent curiosity" as something that guides your seed work, and I think that that phrase, in particular, is so incredibly beautiful. I was kind of hoping you could elaborate on what that means to you.

Tiffany Traverse

Yeah, definitely, reverent curiosity, you know, obviously that's, you know, that's not my own language, that was shared with me by Rowen White. And I just, I really feel that this, the reverent curiosity for me, personally, means, you know, moving forward with a lot of this work when I'm unsure and, also without, you know, a formal academic education as well. I mean, I'm basically trial-by-error and trial-by-doing. And I find that that curiosity, that reverent curiosity, is such a, you know, such a little girl Tiff thing. You know, it's me when I was a young girl, you know, crushing those yarrow seeds between my fingers to see what would happen. And I really feel that that's a lot of what I do around the farm. You know, I just, I'm so curious; I want to know what happens. You know, what happens when I try this or what happens if I don't do this? And, yeah, so a lot of the seed work that I do that isn't to do with the rarer Indigenous seeds, you know, the ones that do need a lot more babying, but with other varieties like through variety trialing, I like to, you know, put them to the test. I have a very challenging soil, very hard clay pack soil, as well as a very short growing season in zone two, which is roughly around ninety days of growing. And I really just like to put these different seeds to the test a little bit because, you know, with our changing climate, we have to change and adapt as well.

And, so, I think, yeah, definitely, that reverent curiosity for me means just to see, like, what happens if I just leave them out there a little bit longer, you know, can they stand just a little bit of cold weather and frost? Yeah. I'm not too mean with my plants, though. I just, I can't do it. But yeah, some of them, and I, you know, then they get these beautiful names, you know, it's not just Alaskan Pea, it's Alaskan Pea, the Survivor of Frosts. You know, they will get this grande name because they've survived like a pretty hard frost here. So, I like to honour that a little bit as well

Steph Benoit

For people who aren't familiar with the exact geography of, you know, what's now known as British Columbia, you're also at sort of the extremes. I think that this is something that makes it all the more impressive to me is that you're doing all of this in an area where you can get frost potentially in August, and that's that. So, it's kind of one of these things of, like, proving that you can absolutely do this if you have the will, even if you're not, you're not sitting in sunny Southern California with a year-round growing, sort of, situation.

What are some of the projects that are coming down the line for you?

Tiffany Traverse

For the last little while, I've actually been volunteering on the advisory council for the Community Seed Network, which is a sort of a joint venture project with Seed Savers Exchange and SeedChange. And basically, what we've been trying to do as advisory council members is advocate on behalf of this amazing resource that's out there for anyone. You know, you can go online, you can search for people that might have had themselves listed as mentors or seed sellers or like really anything; seed libraries as well, those are, those are on there. And then there's a whole page where they've just, they've compiled all this information on how to save seeds from beginner all the way up to advanced plant breeding; you know, as well as operational guidelines on, you know, how, if I wanted to set up a seed library at my public library in town, how about do I go about doing that, instead of reinventing this wheel and starting from scratch.

They've really taken all this information and put it in one place, and it's just the most beautiful thing. It's very satisfying to know that, you know, people don't have to spin their wheels, like, trying to, you know, do all this research because a lot of it has been done before. And it's really just this living document and website where the information can get updated at any time.

So, my work there is really just, you know, on behalf of the seeds and on behalf of, you know, sharing this information with others to show, you know, it's not hard, and it's not easy to save seed, it's kind of that thing. It depends on how far you really want to go with it. But it really, you know, for the home gardener who wants to save seed for their family, it's really quite easy if that's something that you want to get into. And, I know with Covid there was this mad dash of people buying tons of seed and, you know, the seed, big seed companies, even were having to close down because they were just getting bombarded with seed orders. And, you know, I saw this happening, and I was really torn. You know, a part of me was feeling really amazing for, you know, seed growers saying like, "Yeah, this is awesome. They're going to be doing so well this year in a time when things are very challenging." But then, on the other side, I was like, "Oh, shoot." Like, well, you know if they don't have that information on how to save and care for those seeds throughout the season and then to save them at the end of the season, well, then we're right back where we started in the spring. And just knowing that my, you know, my Indigenous blood and heart tells me that time is not linear and we're always

thinking in this like, here's a start and a stop; it's not, you know, it's this, it's this cycle. It's this cyclical being. And, I think this is a way for me to really advocate for that and help people, help guide them along that path if that's really where they want to go, you know, because the seeds need to be adapting alongside us and alongside our climate. And, yeah, I just, I fear that you know, we're going to get back into that same situation come spring again, when, you know, if there's people out there that bottle these seeds and planted them and maybe they got a really nice harvest, but they didn't realize that "Oh, hey, I did get a really sweet harvest. I can actually go and save some of those seeds to plant for next year." And not be in that, you know, not have that fear again that they're not going to be able to buy seeds next year.

Steph Benoit

Do you, have you come across any seeds that have either been really well adapted or had really unique stories or that you feel particularly, sort of, connected to for certain reasons?

Tiffany Traverse

Yeah, definitely. I mean, there's so many that I, it's hard to pick just a few. I mean, it's like trying to tell me to pick my favourite child; it's really difficult.

You know, I look back at when I started the Seed Seva mentorship with Rowen, and there was a particular seed that was gifted to me from my dear sister Danika. It was a Purple Orach seed that she had acquired in the Okanagan, and she gifted it to me, and I'd never really grown it or known really what it was. I just, she had fed this Purple Orach to me in a salad when we were together for a dance workshop in Vancouver, and it was just this beautiful, like, deep, rich purple plant; it was just so gorgeous.

It was like a mountain spinach, this perpetual spinach. I'm like, "Oh man, I need to grow that, it's just so beautiful, and see how it does, you know, in the north." And, so that was, sort of, one of the seeds that I chose as one of my projects seeds to steward throughout the season and just see how it did. And, you know, I put it in the ground, and I started growing it and, sure enough, this beautiful purple plant started coming out. And I was just learning about her, learning about what the leaves look like, you know, what happened when she went to seed, and just, you know, tasting at every chance, and just fell in love with this plant. And so over the years, you know, I just have really been carefully growing her and watching her. You know, there was a full two seasons where I was actually roguing out some of the green because, I

mean, orach comes in, you know, purples and greens and different colours, but there, it just had this such deep magenta beautiful colour.

I figured I wanted to try and harness that gorgeousness that I fell in love with, so I would just start picking out the green and eating it; and, in my own way, doing my own plant breeding. And, I mean, sort of realizing it but not realizing it at the same time that that's exactly what I was doing in my own little way. You know, learning about it along the way with Rowen's course. And it's just this gorgeous plant that's basically naturalized itself here in our, in our zone. You know, it reseeds itself; she comes back, and she's, just this beautiful, gorgeous plant. And I don't know if you've ever seen a Purple Orach when she goes to seed, and I mean, I've got pictures where it's well over my head.

Steph Benoit

Oh my gosh.

Tiffany Traverse

It's just this, like, magnificent plant. Oh, yeah, a lot of seed plants, when they go to seed, are just, they're phenomenal. So, definitely really fallen in love with that whole seed, the plant, and just that it was gifted to me by somebody I love so dearly.

Yeah, so that's one. Another one that I'm actually just growing for the first time this year is a bean that was given to me by Kris Hubbard. I'm sure a lot of people have heard of Kris Hubbard. And, I was, Lisa Bloodnick, who's also in my Seed Seva mentorship, she was able to get a few seeds from Kris for me and send them up to me in the north. And they're actually a Ktunaxa bean, important to the Ktunaxa People, the Kootenay People who are my cousins. Like, these are, these are my people that, you know, when the Secwépemc and the Ktunaxa met in the Columbia Valley, I mean, they almost killed each other; there was almost a great battle. And they found ways to communicate with each other because they didn't speak the same language. And over time, they became great allies and friends and eventually intermarried.

So, these are our ancestors. Like these are actually ancestral seeds, for me; these are my cousin beans, I call them. And, so I'm growing them in the greenhouse right now so I can keep a really close eye on them. And I'm just, every time I go out there and see them, they're changing, they're beautiful.

They're growing this, really, like, these huge rich green leaves, beautiful, like, double colour pink flowers, beautiful flowers, so I can't wait to see what the pods do, but they're, yeah, they're beautiful.

So, one day, what I'm hoping is that you know, maybe I can grow out a bit of that seed and then eventually bring some of that home with me and speak to some of the elders and see, you know, get more of their story. Because I mean, they do have connections; the Kootenay territory does dip down into what's known as the United States right now.

And, so we have that shared territory. And, so it would be really neat and interesting to see if we can, maybe, find a little bit more of their story. I feel like their story isn't, you know, complete, so it'd be really interesting to try and piece that together.

Steph Benoit

Right now is a really interesting time to be talking about decolonization in our food system. And I think a lot of people, like myself, who are settlers on this land and are trying to imagine what honouring Indigenous food sovereignty actually looks like and what decolonizing the food system actually looks like. And I was wondering if you have anything to speak to on that?

Tiffany Traverse

Yeah, definitely. That's a really good question, and it is, you know, it's high time that these conversations, you know, were happening; and I call them, you know, those uncomfy conversations. You know, I don't have the answer really other than listening to Black and Indigenous, you know, People of Colour and supporting them in their work wherever possible. It is just so important. There are so many people out there that are doing this really hard work and, at the same time, healing from so many years and generations of oppression that I think now more than ever, we need to wake up, and we need to be helping our people and just helping each other heal. But at the same time doing our own healing. I mean, I know that the terms white fragility and white guilt get thrown around quite a bit and, but they are these true things that are happening, you know. It's, you get that gut feeling, that visceral feeling that you're just like, "Ugh, I just, I want to help," and that feeling, it sucks. It's like, yeah, it does suck. It sucks really, really hard. But you know, the people that are being oppressed upon, that

really sucks, and I don't even have any idea what that even feels like; I come from a very privileged background.

So, I guess my advice is really to listen. You know, Indigenous and Black and People of Colour like, you know, they're trying to really figure out what exactly is needed. But when the time comes for when people are ready to let us know what is needed, we really just need to be listening. We need to sit back, you know, listen to what they have to say, and realize that these are people that have been oppressed for a very, very long time.

They're not there to educate because it's very, very exhausting.

You know, so there's ways that maybe we can help by, again, you know, amplifying their voices, amplifying their work, and just, yeah, just really sitting back and listening to that. And you know, these people just with so much oppression that's been thrown upon them and thrust at them, it's, they're very resilient people. And, I actually, I had a quick story that my great-grandmother, she wrote for a periodical back in the day, you know, just speaking to the Indian Act which, I mean, we look at our, you know, reserve system and it's still in play. And, you know, these are the types of systems that are very, very harmful. They separate us. And, yeah, I just, I wanted to read this story from my great-grandmother.

"The Indians worked hard and also made their own clothing. I remember the first time the government started helping them. It was 1928. I went to the Acklemere post office and grocery store run by Mr. Frank Richardson. He said, 'Take this box to your grandmother. The government is feeding the Indians now.' The box contains salt, sugar, about a cup of flour, beans, and baking powder.

The Shuswaps made sourdough bread, so they didn't even use baking powder. But the Kootenays did use the baking powder for their bread. Grandmother sat on the floor, looking at the box of goods and at the beans, and she laughed as there was only about a cup of dried beans. She said, 'Oh my, the poor man must be short of beans. Tell Mr. Richardson I still have a half a gunny sack of dried beans at my old house.' I don't remember what else the government gave out, but it was just handfuls, maybe only enough for one day, for one person."

Just a funny story, you know, even after all of that, you know, of my great-grandmother's grandmother felt sorry for this poor man that he didn't have enough beans to feed all these people. So, yeah, I mean, just it shows the resiliency. I mean, you know, my great-grandmother's family, they went through a lot. They survived the residential school system.

My great-grandmother saw, you know, how alcohol ravaged a lot of her people, you know when the white folks came through. And, even after all of the heartbreak and the oppression and the stealing of land, like, it's unceded territory--Secwépemc is unceded territory--she still was this amazing woman who fed people food, fed people these incredible stories, and just embraced her language. I mean, she could speak English; she could speak her Secwépemc language; she could speak the Ktunaxa language; I think she could even speak a few Swiss swears that my great-grandpa taught her. So, yeah, really just, you know, coming back to the question of, you know, what can we as settlers do to help? Yeah, really, just listen and amplify these voices. And support, you know, different causes that are happening out there. And, yeah, like, you know, donations and, you know, grant funding a lot of these people are relying on, you know, grant funding as well for a lot of their work through nonprofits. So, yeah, that's I think how we can help for now.

Steph Benoit

There's a lot of work to do and a long path ahead of us, but I feel very inspired to see women like yourself at the forefront of this. So, thank you, Tiffany, so, so much. I can't express how much it means to me to be able to share this time with you, to have you in this movement, to have you share your stories and your voice. And I hope that over time we can continue to work together on this bigger project and continue to cross paths.

Tiffany Traverse

Thank you so much for having me and I, yeah, I really hope that, you know, we can, you know, keep having these discussions, keep having those uncomfy conversations; it's important. Definitely, yeah, just keep talking and keep amplifying the voices of the Black and Indigenous and people of colour. You know, their work is really important; there's a lot of people doing some remarkable work out there for the better of the world. I mean, we're doing it for everyone.

Thank you so much for having me.

Steph Benoit

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