



SEEDHEADS TRANSCRIPT

Episode 23: RAV SINGH SINGH & EKOW STONE English

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[00:00:00] STEPH BENOIT: Hey, and 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 Ottawa, Ontario, on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg people.

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[00:00:42] STEPH BENOIT: Today's episode is all about okra and two of the young farmers growing it in the greater Toronto area.

[00:00:50] *Meet the Okra Farmers: Echo and RAV SINGH*

[00:00:50] STEPH BENOIT: I'm very grateful to have had the opportunity to speak with Ekow Stone and Rav. Ekow is a farmer, artist, educator, and entrepreneur. He's also the co-founder of Its Giving Farm

in Altona, Ontario. On the territory that is covered by the Dish with one Spoon Wampum Belt Treaty.

[00:01:07] STEPH BENOIT: Rav Singh is a farmer, environmental educator, and the owner and founder of Shade of Miti Farm. She farms in Caledon, Ontario on the territory of the Anishnaabe, Haudenosaunee, Huron, Wendat, and Mississaugas of the Credit. In our conversation, we covered why okra is such a special crop to both of them, what they're looking for in their okra breeding project, the challenges of starting a farm as a young person, and the future of okra in Southern Ontario.

[00:01:33] STEPH BENOIT: I left this conversation feeling really inspired, and I hope you take away a little of that inspiration as well. As always, thanks for listening.

[00:01:40] STEPH BENOIT: I really appreciate you taking the time. It is a busy time for farmers, even though most of the world is still under snow and people are, what do you mean it's a busy time for farmers. But we are so glad you're both here and I'm really excited to pick your brains about okra. To begin, I was hoping you could both introduce yourselves, maybe tell me a little bit about your farm, your role and why okra?

[00:02:03] STEPH BENOIT: How did you get to be on an okra breeding podcast?

[00:02:09] *Echo's Farming Journey and Love for Okra*

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[00:02:09] STEPH BENOIT: Maybe Ekow, do you wanna go first?

[00:02:11] EKOW STONE: My name is Ekow Stone. I've been farming since 2020. Started farming at an urban farm project in Etobicoke with FoodShare Toronto. There is where I met my friend and now business partner, Fianna Dirks. We started a farm where we are now, It's Giving

Farm in 2023. We're on Rouge Park, national Rouge Park Land, so we're leasing from the feds.

[00:02:36] EKOW STONE: It's been a huge journey, I'm very thankful to be so closely GTA. We're an hour outside of Toronto, so I'm still in touch with my friends and communities to a certain extent. Still far away, in Toronto, but far enough that we have a more rural area where it's quiet.

[00:02:54] EKOW STONE: We do mixed vegetables. CSA market thing. That's the typical framework of how you get into farming. If you are gonna get into farming, it's so, so difficult. The barriers are insurmountable it seems at times. But then when you do get in, this is the style, small mixed veg market, garden style.

[00:03:11] EKOW STONE: And yeah, okra has quickly become a favourite of mine to grow. it's very beautiful plants. It's a favourite plant of many members of my family as well as members of my communities. I think primarily got into okra because it was surprising that tropical plant could grow so readily in Southern Ontario.

[00:03:34] EKOW STONE: So I think that's what gravitated me towards it initially and yeah.

[00:03:39] STEPH BENOIT: Very cool. Rav, do you wanna jump in?

[00:03:44] RAV SINGH's *Farming Story and Cultural Crops*

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[00:03:44] RAV SINGH: Sure. My name is Rav Singh. I am in Toronto, and I farm in Caledon, which is outside, well, not outside of the city, but I say outside of the city. I've been farming also since 2020, 2021 ish. And prior to that I was working at a

[00:04:00] RAV SINGH: nonprofit outside of Toronto doing urban agriculture education. So we were teaching people how to grow food and we had a little market garden that we were growing food and that

was donated to local food banks. And I love the work, I love the people I worked with, but ultimately the nonprofit world was really challenging for me to be in

[00:04:19] RAV SINGH: and I was seeing a lot of things that we could do in the food system that I think would really strengthen the food system and our communities that I wasn't able to implement within the nonprofit I was at and the nonprofit system. So that's why I decided to go off and start my own farm. To hopefully try to implement some of those changes and things that I was seeing that I knew our community needed.

[00:04:44] RAV SINGH: One of them being more of these, what people would call "cultural crops". I don't really like that term, but for the ease of understanding what I'm talking about. Things okra and, a couple others that we might talk about today. Yeah. So when I decided to go off on my own and start farming, I was really lucky to be connected to a family farm - they've been farming there organically for a very long time.

[00:05:10] RAV SINGH: The individual that owns it, semi-retired from farming in 2015 and has been renting it out to other people since then. 'cause they really want to see the farm continue operating. So I leased about an acre of land there and the. Entire farm has about five of us there now. So there's me, another farmer, the beekeeper, and someone who has a community garden.

[00:05:35] RAV SINGH: He's growing for his family. My farm is called Shade of Miti, and I specialize more in South Asian vegetables. So things okra and bitter melon are two of my biggest crops that I grow.

[00:05:47] STEPH BENOIT: I was wondering if maybe you could explain a little bit more the backstory behind them.

[00:05:53] *Naming the Farms: The Stories Behind the Names*

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[00:05:53] EKOW STONE: Yeah, I have a knack for naming things.

[00:05:56] EKOW STONE: That's a habit of mine. Yeah. I came up with the name of Gift Giving Farm., it's a term that's pretty popular now with Gen Z, but as most things originated with black queer folks. And so I think we were, when we were starting the farm, we were trying to think, okay, what's a good name? And I think I blurted it out it's giving farm, which also, it's catchy.

[00:06:18] EKOW STONE: That attracts the queers is able to encompass the idea of generosity and abundance. That's very important to our farm. For older folks who are not aware or whatever, it might sound a little weird or awkward, the phrasing it's giving farm, but most people catch on, and so that's story, right?

[00:06:34] EKOW STONE: Mm-hmm.

[00:06:34] RAV SINGH: Cool. People know what you're talking about,

[00:06:37] STEPH BENOIT: oh, it's *giving* farm.

[00:06:40] EKOW STONE: Exactly.

[00:06:41] RAV SINGH: Nice. Next time I'm gonna come to you for creating a name because my name took a very long time to find and my sister helped me with it 'cause I was so lost as to what to name my for. So I got to the shade of Miti name because I really knew I wanted a word from my mother tongue in there, which is Punjabi.

[00:07:03] RAV SINGH: So I landed on Miti because Miti means soil in Punjabi and soil is the foundation of farming and also soil is one of our key tools against climate change, and that climate action is really important to me and to my farming practice. The rest of the name, the "shade of" really came because once I got stuck on this idea, I knew I needed the acronym of my name to be SOM, which in a lot of nerdy soil

[00:07:37] RAV SINGH: spaces and text books SOM stands for soil organic matter, which is, yeah, my sister helped me come up with the

“shade of” part to fit into that. Since then, someone actually pointed out to me, I didn't think about this until they said it, but the “shade of” can also mean how we're all different shades of the colour, different colours of soil, which I found really beautiful.

[00:08:01] RAV SINGH: Thank you to them for bringing that to my attention.

[00:08:05] STEPH BENOIT: Oh my gosh. I love both of these names so much. I really appreciate all the thought that you put into them 'cause those are excellent names.

[00:08:12] *Identity and Farming: Cultural Stewardship*

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[00:08:12] STEPH BENOIT: So I think you touched on it a little bit, but I was hoping that you could expand on how your identity as farmers, as cultural stewards and as young people rooted near a large city shape, the way that you grow and save and breed okra.

[00:08:33] EKOW STONE: Okay, I'll go.

[00:08:34] STEPH BENOIT: But you volunteered to go first. So

[00:08:35] EKOW STONE: I think to be completely honest, it hasn't been the most intentional journey for me. I think a lot of things happened to me, which very thankful for. Is a very, very powerful crop. Or the farm that I started at, it was a very popular crop and people would go nuts for it.

[00:08:54] EKOW STONE: And I think seeing the GTA is a very culturally diverse. Part of Canada, the most cultured there was part of Canada. In contrast, farmers, there's market, direct to market farming is not so much, mostly white, middle, upper class, cosmopolitan, hippie types, which I'm, I'm half of that background.

[00:09:16] EKOW STONE: I guess for me, I was thinking in my head where I was starting to farm and then I was growing this crop for brown people, black people, people of South Asian descent. Equipment, people who eat the crop. I was thinking in my head, how do I make it so I'm a small farmer, so how do I, I can not yet sell to the major grocers where folks who eat this crop more readily get, get their okra.

[00:09:43] EKOW STONE: There is small cultural grocers, which I'm working on building relationships. But the problem with that too is they don't buy a lot. And so if you're a direct sales farmer. How are you gonna ship it? It doesn't logically make sense. And I think a lot about marketing. How can I get it into people's hands, not just at the farmer's market because they don't go to the farmer's market downtown Toronto.

[00:10:08] EKOW STONE: The geography of the city is such that a lot of downtown Toronto is middle, upper class, farmer's market. So I've been thinking about, yeah, how do I get this crop into the hands of my people? And part of the breeding journey came about. Was working on developing okra that would be easier to grow as a farmer because if it was something a very bushy productive gets hard in two days, okra, it's a very, very hard plant to work with.

[00:10:40] EKOW STONE: It sucks labor costs and labor is such an expensive thing on farming. So I was thinking about, how do I make it so this is an efficient, easy crop to grow? So then I don't want to be selling \$7 a pound okra.

[00:10:59] EKOW STONE: I want it to be, or \$4 would I think something that people can get behind. If it's fresh, it's local, what I mean? So. Yeah, that's where I'm at. I first saw the diversity, the colours and the different traits that they could exhibit, and I was very inspired by that. But then it became, okay, how do I apply this to our operation and my head space right now?

[00:11:18] EKOW STONE: because we've sunk in a lot of investment into this business and we're trying to make this work is very, very business

minded. And so I'm trying to, wed my values feeding my people well at the same time. I can't do that. It's gonna break me. So, and I think that's where the breeding is coming in for me right now is thinking about breeding an okra that's fishing and easy for small scale ecological farmers in this part of the world.

[00:11:43] EKOW STONE: And maybe that has some economic value down the line.

[00:11:49] STEPH BENOIT: I feel like, in the Gen Z vein, I wanna snap for that because it's giving reality of how you can have very strong values about certain things and want to reach specific markets and your time is valuable and you have to exist within this capitalist system regardless of how much you wanna buy into it.

[00:12:10] STEPH BENOIT: So. Thank you for that. I really appreciate your honesty and your thought process of trying to wed these two ideas. Thank you.

[00:12:19] *Challenges and Opportunities in Growing Okra*

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[00:12:19] STEPH BENOIT: RAV SINGH, maybe I'll repeat the question for you so it's fresh on your mind. How does your identity as a young farmer, as a cultural steward, as young people rooted in your big city shape, the way that you approach growing, saving, and breeding okra?

[00:12:33] RAV SINGH: Yeah. I think I initially started growing okra because prior to my, when I started farming. When I was working in the nonprofit world around food, we would do pop-up farmer's markets once in a while. And Echo said, it's a very small niche of people and a very specific type of person that shops there, which is, one of the things that I noticed was.

[00:12:59] RAV SINGH: I was, wow, it's so great that all these people have the option of getting local tomatoes if they wanted to. It's great

that they have the option of getting organic local cucumbers if they wanted that. And then I was thinking, I was, wow, my family doesn't actually have that option. For a lot of the foods we eat, okra, for example, our only option is to go to.

[00:13:22] RAV SINGH: Indian grocery store or whatever and get a frozen pack of okra, maybe fresh. We're lucky, but by the time it gets home, it's half black and whatever.

[00:13:31] STEPH BENOIT: Yeah.

[00:13:32] RAV SINGH: When I started farming, I saw it as an opportunity to bring those options to my community and my family. I know we can't grow everything, we can't grow mangoes here as much as I want to or coconuts, but there's a lot that we can actually grow here.

[00:13:48] RAV SINGH: It was really important for me to focus on growing those things okra. Since then, it's been a great way for me to also connect to my family and my ancestry because I do come from a very long line of farmers and from India when my family immigrated here. There was a big disconnect between that side of our story, what it is now, and for many reasons.

[00:14:14] RAV SINGH: My family has been very hesitant to talk about that or encourage even things gardening, touching the land, touching the soil. So that's been a good tool for me to explore that on my own. But also since I started farming, my parents and my aunts uncles have been much more open to talking about.

[00:14:33] RAV SINGH: What life was like as farmers back in India. My parents come out and help me on the farm now sometimes, which is amazing. 'cause the first year they were, like, no, but now they come maybe a little bit too much. So it's been a really good healing tool for my family too, and a way to bring us together in a different sense and different way.

[00:14:55] RAV SINGH: And, yeah, being a young person in the city, we, I grew up in the city. I still live here and I see where our world is heading. It's not a great place and it's very scary the direction we're going in. This is a way for me to, I don't wanna say sound doomsday, but it is a way for me to make sure I'm doing what I can now to help protect my community and my family.

[00:15:22] RAV SINGH: I think we're gonna need more skills this very, very soon.

[00:15:26] STEPH BENOIT: Mm-hmm.

[00:15:27] RAV SINGH: I'll leave it at that.

[00:15:28] STEPH BENOIT: No, no, that's so beautiful as well. food is such a tool and a conduit of expression and cultural identity and also personal preferences and all of those things. It's something I learned when I went vegetarian a number of years ago and I thought I could tell people what I knew about being vegetarian and they would change, and I realized that actually, it's so deeply woven into our identities and our self-perception and it's really beautiful to hear about you coming full circle and being able to reconnect with that part of your identity through this crop.

[00:15:59] STEPH BENOIT: But I think something we could talk about a little bit more is what your work means within the broader context of land and community and resilience.

[00:16:07] EKOW STONE: Yeah, I guess I'm thinking about, I don't even know if you'd call it alternative foodways, but in terms of our food web, both ecologically and within the city, we import a lot of okra doing this cursory research, and there's this guy, I forget his name is Research in Guelph, who did paper on .

[00:16:29] EKOW STONE: the potential of what he would call these specialty crops or cultural crops, as Ralph was saying, which it's agriculture. It's all cultural, but it's about, yeah, whose culture it's

getting access to farming to be produced and, all that stuff. So I, I guess I'm excited and thinking about how, it was an old study, but he was talking about how 10 acres or so I think in Ontario is grown in okra.

[00:16:52] EKOW STONE: It was 10 years ago, so it could have doubled, it could have tripled, but even then, it's not very much land and we import hundreds of thousands of kilograms of okra, fresh and frozen. I was thinking about how. There could be real economic reasons, and I might face that barrier when it happens as to why there's not more locally produced.

[00:17:14] EKOW STONE: When you go to No Frills or a Metro or any of the larger conventional grocery stores, it's Ontario Foodland, right? Which I don't know how much about that, but I know it's a aggregator. These large scales vegetable producers will produce so much squash or so many. Tomatoes or whatever, and then peaches from the Niagara area and stuff that, and then that will make it into the large grocery stores and it'll be very cheap because there's a glut of it at that time of the year.

[00:17:42] EKOW STONE: Why is okra not there? There's so much crossover, and so I'm thinking about, yeah, in terms of resiliency and community and stuff that. Thinking about localizing some of these culturally important foods and producing them and getting them to our communities directly because we're not big enough to go through Ontario Foodland or any of these major.

[00:18:07] EKOW STONE: That's not, I don't have, but thinking about where do we go where it's convenient and accessible. So not necessarily a farmer's market and not necessarily a small grocer, but something in between. Mm-hmm. These are the things that they've been making my brain go. Mm-hmm. But that's something I've been thinking about a lot, and I think there's a lot of opportunity there.

[00:18:27] EKOW STONE: So that's what I'm excited about.

[00:18:29] STEPH BENOIT: Something that made me think of while you were talking is that crops that you expect to see in the grocery store in Ontario or the default ones that appeal most to a very Eurocentric palate are not necessarily crops from here. It's interesting to think about how the history of colonialism and the history of taste has influenced what is a default Ontario crop.

[00:18:49] STEPH BENOIT: Something apples even, where we think of that as ingrained in here. Apples aren't from here. I was shocked when I learned that. It just makes me reflect on the fact that the crops that are popular in the grocery store are reflective of how Canada's identity is changing as well, and the demographics are changing.

[00:19:08] STEPH BENOIT: I think as demographics change and as tastes change, hopefully more people branch out and try things besides the potatoes and apples of the world. I hope that's reflected in the food that's readily available. I hope that becomes more accessible to more people.

[00:19:23] EKOW STONE: Mm-hmm.

[00:19:27] STEPH BENOIT: Unless Rav, you have anything to add on?

[00:19:30] RAV SINGH: I think the crops will change as the people of this land, who's here, what they want access to, and what they want to eat. I think it's equally important, especially for crops like okra, for us to make sure that they are grown. I don't wanna say by communities that have that crop of importance, but to make sure that our stories are at the front of it and to make sure we are the ones leading this work.

[00:20:02] RAV SINGH: And to make sure that people understand the history and significance of things like okra.

[00:20:09] *Breeding Okra: Techniques and Goals*

[00:20:09] STEPH BENOIT: So to the uninitiated, can you give a little bit of background on how you breed okra? So what's the process for selecting and saving seeds from year to year?

[00:20:19] RAV SINGH: Oh my God. I think Ekow's been doing such an amazing job at leading this.

[00:20:26] RAV SINGH: So there's different, for specifically breeding okra, and not breeding okra but any crop, there's different ways that you can go through the breeding process, and it really depends on what your goal is, what resources you have, how quickly you wanna do a labor, whatever, depends on a lot of different things.

[00:20:46] RAV SINGH: So basically what we did this year, which was our first year of this okra trial, was we got our hands on literally every okra we could think of under the sun, and literally, I don't even know. I think there was over 20 different types. There was a little,

[00:21:05] EKOW STONE: yeah,

[00:21:06] RAV SINGH: 25.

STEPH BENOIT: Where are you finding them all?

[00:21:10] EKOW STONE: They're all American. Each was a lot. I guess it goes to the south, that?

[00:21:14] STEPH BENOIT: Yeah.

[00:21:16] EKOW STONE: I was all American. We didn't bring anything from outside of North America,

[00:21:18] RAV SINGH: Which is really great. So we got the 25 varieties. We grew all of them out and we planted them. We did one planting on my farm and then one at its giving farm.

[00:21:31] RAV SINGH: And basically this year, 'cause it was our first year, was a lot of observation. So seeing which crops were starting to,

reveal the traits that we decided we were specifically gonna prioritize and select for at the end of this year. There were two that came out. I don't remember their names. Z Best and Ever something... Ever tender.

[00:21:56] RAV SINGH: Those two seem to come out at the top in terms of the traits that we were looking for. So I think the next step for us from here is to focus on maybe growing those two out. This growing season and doing some crossing with them, getting to a point perhaps next year or maybe the year after, depending on things going where we have this big mega seed stock that we can distribute to other farmers, get other people involved.

[00:22:28] RAV SINGH: 'cause we do wanna see how this plays out on different microclimates, on different soil land, et cetera, and see what other farmers are interested in and then take it from there. Did I get that right?

[00:22:39] EKOW STONE: A hundred percent. Yeah. We got a lot of wisdom from Chris who started Utopian Seed Project with some other folks.

[00:22:47] EKOW STONE: And Rebecca from the EFAO connected us with him and he gave us, so initially we were, okay, let's grow out all of this okra and let it cross, and then select for the traits that we want, okra. 50% that it'll self pollinate or cross, and the flowers are only open for about 24 hours.

[00:23:00] EKOW STONE: So if the day before you see flowers start to come up, you put a little mesh bag around it, it opens it self pollinates, it closes, and then you can take it off and then you string a tie on it and then you have a truth to that type. But then if you don't do that, their genetics will cross through pollinators.

[00:23:17] EKOW STONE: I haven't done any of this yet, but people take Q-Tips and take a pollen and actually put it on the other one. There's even.

[00:23:24] RAV SINGH: More advanced stuff that we're not familiar with

[00:23:26] EKOW STONE: for sure is F1s and stuff.

[00:23:27] EKOW STONE: Initially we were gonna cross it all and then select for what we want. And then he was saying that the best way to do it is as RA was saying, grow out as many as you can.

[00:23:37] EKOW STONE: See the plants that are more closely aligned to what your ideal type is. Choose those two and then cross those two. Plant out that stock, then you're gonna see a lot of genetic variation, I think he said in the first year of planting those. And then, basically as you go, you can begin to start to stabilize a new type as the years go.

[00:24:03] STEPH BENOIT: Yeah. Well, I guess one of my immediate questions from that is what are the traits that you're looking for? the perfect okra shows up in your field and your neck is breaking as you look back at it. What does that look like?

[00:24:14] EKOW STONE: That sounds the classic meme with the woman and the two guys, right?

[00:24:17] EKOW STONE: Looking back, yeah. Yeah. It's shifted quite a bit. I think initially I was thinking,

[00:24:22] STEPH BENOIT: what was I thinking?

[00:24:22] EKOW STONE: I think I was thinking, oh, a super productive, but disease resistant because we have humid summers and they don't humidity. I thought originally when I was in Ghana visiting family, and then I visited a friend who was doing a lot of work in the north with farmers and stuff that.

[00:24:35] EKOW STONE: She gave me some re seat that was 10 feet tall when it grew and only produced three fruit the whole season. I mean, it produced a lot of flowers and then they all aborted and they would only produce three. And then we had Jambalaya F1 from Johnny's an American seed company that is, yeah, an F1 that is from, it's definitely a

Bindi, an Indian type of okra, the way it looks and how it produces very productive and kind of compact, but so spiny and horrible to harvest.

[00:25:02] EKOW STONE: And so I was, oh, it'd be cool to cross these two where one's taller. So it's a little bit more ergonomic and it doesn't get as diseased.

[00:25:12] *Challenges of Growing Okra*

[00:25:16] EKOW STONE: as easily, but it's not productive. And then as learned about more different okra type. It was really, for me personally, it came down to labor and it was, how do I make okra not such a pain in the ass to harvest in September, in August?

[00:25:27] EKOW STONE: It's, I think it would be different if I was a gardener and I grew okra and it was five plants. But if I'm growing a hundred, 200, 300 plants. And then I have tomatoes and I have peppers, and I have carrots and I have kale, and I have calaloo and I have all these other crops.

[00:25:45] EKOW STONE: I want okra to be not such a labor suck. And that was my initial thing. It was about labor and thinking about. It gets to a nice height so you're not bending down so early in the season to get two fruit okras. Lots of times its, its fruit will get hard in two days, so that means you also have to harvest it every other day once it gets to that mature stage.

[00:26:11] EKOW STONE: And then two days later you come back and they've hidden two or three from you and they're all hard and big and that hits morale a lot. They really didn't the fact that when they came to okra, it would have five more fruit that they forgot. Thinking about farmer physical and mental health.

[00:26:27] EKOW STONE: It was, I think what the okra and then as time goes on, thinking about. Taste and productivity, that's stuff that you can

select for within the actual variety itself. But I really wanted a long harvest window, so you only have to come back every four days. Nice height so you weren't bending over all the time, wasn't so bushy

[00:26:50] EKOW STONE: so you can just see the plant and then go, and then next plant. Juju. Juju next plant, instead of looking for stuff. And those two, the Ever tender were very much. I would grow Ever tender. Maybe not Z best because it gets very long and exotic looking, but it's hard to fit it in a pint.

[00:27:07] EKOW STONE: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:27:10] *Breeding Okra for Marketability*

[00:27:10] RAV SINGH: I think when Ekow first approached me about this project, the first thing that I thought about was breeding for marketability 'cause I found that in my years of farming okra experience I've grown so many different types of okra and different communities and different cultures have a very strong vocal preference of a certain okra.

[00:27:38] RAV SINGH: Found my experience that for some people, if I don't have the long slender green okra, they're like no, that's not okra, I don't want it. Or if I don't have the short ones, they're, nope, not good enough. So for me, it would be great to have an okra that everyone loves, and fits everyone's preferences.

[00:27:57] RAV SINGH: And then I realized very quickly that that's so not realistic. People are gonna have their preferences no matter what. So I think especially for okra is something that takes up a lot of space, a lot of time. You really have to prioritize the farmer's needs in this case, which are what Ekow said, getting something that's really easy to harvest.

[00:28:18] RAV SINGH: So we're reducing the labor time, and we're not breaking our back spending over every other day trying to search and hunt for okra and finding one.

[00:28:28] STEPH BENOIT: It sounds an underwhelming Easter egg hunt.

[00:28:31] RAV SINGH: Sometimes it is.

[00:28:32] *Collaborations and Community Engagement*

[00:28:32] STEPH BENOIT: Are you working with any other growers or researchers on okra adaptation?

[00:28:39] EKOW STONE: Yes. I guess we just yesterday talked to Manish.

[00:28:46] EKOW STONE: He runs Gaia Seeds.

[00:28:48] STEPH BENOIT: Yeah. Manish was on this podcast.

[00:28:51] EKOW STONE: Sweet. Sweet. Yeah, so he's very interested and he's wanting to get involved in certain capacity. I think especially as somebody who has a lot of things on the go with the farm, I'll work with one person. I don't want to be on a WhatsApp group for this.

[00:29:07] EKOW STONE: So I've been very, keep this this tight as possible for now until we get to an established point and then we can what Rav was saying near the beginning of growing out a big seed stock and then distributing it and leaving it for if people at the EFAO to coordinate and manage that.

[00:29:21] STEPH BENOIT: Mm-hmm. And then how did you two meet and then initially make this connection that there was this mutual interest in okra?

[00:29:30] RAV SINGH: I don't know how we met. I think we met maybe, officially met through some EFAO or maybe even at a NFU events, the EFAO's, Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario. NFU is National Farmers Union.

[00:29:46] EKOW STONE: I don't remember. I think it was probably something

[00:29:47] RAV SINGH: yeah. Even from the BIPOC caucus.

[00:29:50] EKOW STONE: It could have been the BIPOC caucus

[00:29:52] EKOW STONE: Yeah.

[00:29:53] RAV SINGH: Prior to this breeding project, I did an okra trial for two years. I worked with about 6 to 10 farmers each year to grow out different varieties of okra. We were looking to create a general base data set for okra in Southern Ontario. We looked at things yield productivity when the first flower came out, marketability very general basic things that.

[00:30:20] RAV SINGH: I'm so happy that Echo decided to continue that in this new iteration of their breeding okra trial. 'cause I think that seemed such a good next step.

[00:30:33] STEPH BENOIT: And you were building on probably what wasn't a lot of data that was already existing.

[00:30:39] RAV SINGH: Yeah. At least for Southern Ontario, but yeah, for Southern Ontario, even for Canada, I would say there's really not a lot of information specifically for how to grow it commercially or at a farm production scale.

[00:30:54] STEPH BENOIT: Makes sense.

[00:30:55] *Adapting Okra to Northern Climates*

[00:30:55] STEPH BENOIT: I think you've both touched on this a little bit, but what are some of the challenges you faced trying to adapt okra to more northern climates, and how have you navigated that?

[00:31:06] EKOW STONE: I didn't actually find okra challenging for our climate. I think southern Ontario, it's hot. It gets hot here. Yeah.

[00:31:13] EKOW STONE: It's very, very similar to Ghana or the Caribbean or India in the summertime. Like any of the heat loving crops, don't force it to go out too early. 'cause if you have a tiny vulnerable seedling out there dealing with a, a may night that goes down to five degrees, it's not gonna that.

[00:31:34] RAV SINGH: Mm-hmm.

[00:31:35] EKOW STONE: But on the other end, in October, and it's huge and established, it can, it'll be fine with getting hit with five degrees. It'll, obviously the production will slow down, but we have a good 10 weeks of harvest or 12 weeks of harvest depending on. What the climate is doing. I mean, obviously with climate change, I really hope it's not the case, but, Lord knows what's gonna happen.

[00:31:56] EKOW STONE: But we've been getting such wet summers, the last two years have been so, so wet at the beginning, which is okra likes doesn't, doesn't, it likes water to produce fruit, but it really can do well with no, no water. It's very, very tolerant once it's established. And so that could be a challenge.

[00:32:18] EKOW STONE: I mentioned the humidity with powdery mildew and other fungal diseases, which again, breeding. So if you have a plant that is less bushy and has more airflow potential, then it is gonna have less foliar fungal diseases, which is an advantage. And then some plans for whatever reasons, their personality, they're more resilient to those things.

[00:32:42] EKOW STONE: But. Yeah, it's funny it is with tomatoes or any of those heat loving crops. It's definitely, okay, one is the last rocks, okay, one is the actual soil gonna be a nice temperature, okay, let's go. But then once you get it in and it's going, it's more about managing humidity, weeds it would be in any other climate.

[00:32:54] EKOW STONE: And yeah, it's sucks because I find that it's peaking right at the very end. okra has this big, huge shoot and it has all this fruit coming out. It was really dry and hot throughout September and even in October, and I was, the okra was on fire. It was really, really happy with that, so that was exciting.

[00:33:15] EKOW STONE: Yeah, I don't know. Doesn't feel more challenging than any other crop, frankly, ? Mm-hmm. Kale has flea beetles. Okra has, yeah.

[00:33:27] STEPH BENOIT: Cool.

[00:33:28] *Space and Crop Planning for Okra*

[00:33:28] STEPH BENOIT: Okra also takes up a lot of space. So how does that fit into your crop planning, and do you think it's maybe a barrier for some folks who are interested in growing the crop but are working on smaller farms?

[00:33:42] RAV SINGH: Yeah, a hundred percent. But I think when I've talked to other farmers about growing okra, usually the number one reason that they.

[00:33:52] RAV SINGH: Have chosen to stop growing in is because of the space it takes up versus what you get from it.

[00:33:57] STEPH BENOIT: Mm.

[00:33:57] RAV SINGH: So usually, at least this is how I run my farm, but I try to. Every square foot, for example, of production space, I make a

goal for myself, I'm gonna make X amount of dollars per square foot of my farm.

[00:34:11] RAV SINGH: Otherwise I need to change something and okra never has met that for me. But I mean, me and a lot of other farmers, we choose to still grow it because it means different things than the finance and money. One thing that I've really, I've been doing on the side a little bit, but I would love to.

[00:34:30] RAV SINGH: work with other farmers to figure this out is how to intercrop it with other things. So I've tried growing things like fenugreek underneath. 'cause once they get nice and big, you think maybe remove some of the lower leaves and get some space down there for some low growing crops. So I've played around with fenugreek, leafy green, lettuce, spinach.

[00:34:53] RAV SINGH: I've tried cilantro under there before too. I haven't found the perfect fit for it, but I think experimenting with things that can help make the profitability of the space that it takes up make a little bit more sense and worthwhile. But it is true. I think that's one of the reasons why it's not grown commercially here.

[00:35:13] RAV SINGH: If you're a young farmer, you farmer, you're likely growing on three acres or less, and it takes up a lot of valuable space.

[00:35:21] EKOW STONE: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah, 18 inches to 24 inches single row has been what I've done. But this year I'm gonna try 12 inch row. And the reason for that is 'cause when we were talking to Chris, he was talking about people who used six inch spacing with okra.

[00:35:44] RAV SINGH: That's wild.

[00:35:46] EKOW STONE: It is wild. I don't think I wanna do that because it's also a transplanting thing. But yeah, we transplant so transplanting six inches. I'm like, okay, then it's a paper pot. But I think with okra, I'm kinda, I don't know if I want to do that. I don't think I'm

there yet, but I'm curious about pushing okra spacing to the limits and seeing what happens.

[00:36:08] EKOW STONE: I've grown okra 18 inches and then had one okra die, and then there's another okra next to it so that okra has two feet and it took, it grows out so much. Alternatively, you can imagine, especially a okra that's not bushy and it's growth habit, if it's grown 12 inches apart, it might actually be okay with that and .

[00:36:34] EKOW STONE: Be more compact and it's something rather we should talk about is giving it the conditions that we want it to thrive in and then selecting for that. So, if there's a temperamental okra that is bushy and hates being close and we don't save seed from that. But if it's an okra that is doing really well with 12 inch spacing, that's what we want.

[00:36:53] EKOW STONE: And then two rows and then we'll see. because people have mentioned we want to be able to reach around the whole okra spacing is is a thing.

[00:37:03] STEPH BENOIT: I think to that end, do you think we need, how do we get more farmers excited about growing and adapting and saving okra here?

[00:37:15] RAV SINGH: I think you show the money.

[00:37:18] EKOW STONE: Yeah. Get more melanated people on the land. Right? I'm not trying to, I don't need to. Yeah, white folks can grow okra if they want to. Of course my a business partner is white and it's not, it's farmers who are from the backgrounds in which these crops are grown are gonna already have a connection to the communities that are gonna eat that.

[00:37:33] EKOW STONE: very, it's more of, oh, mixed vegetable, carrots, beets, that's, that's the vibe. And I'm not knocking it, I love carrots and beets, but that's, it's a cultural thing, right? That means that

that's what the farmers are gonna look like. Those are the backgrounds, that's their food, that's what they're familiar with.

[00:37:48] EKOW STONE: And then okra is this this niche thing that oh I'll get a cookbook and I'll learn how to do this stew or whatever, if they're curious. And that's awesome. But that's why that mismatch is there, because it's the food system, the food web, it's all underwritten by culture.

[00:38:01] EKOW STONE: And so you have people of different backgrounds having access to land, then they'll match. There's no way that you're gonna have a farmer African descent, not grow okra. Whereas if you have a farmer of European descent, why would they grow okra? It is gonna be mostly white people, right? So that's why you have that thing.

[00:38:18] EKOW STONE: And so. I guess it's not so much about getting people excited, but having more equitable sharing of land and farming opportunities and market opportunities. And then there'll be crossing from that naturally where more farmers, white farmers might be, oh yeah, or this is a dope crop, I'm gonna grow this.

[00:38:36] EKOW STONE: And then, I mean, that's the south, right? white people in the south love okra. And that's because of how the culture has developed for centuries now. And similarly said in Ontario too, I think that as more and more people move here from different parts of the world and more and more people grow their culturally relevant crops and open up their restaurants and get more of their food into more accessible places, is that you're gonna have more and more people getting down with okra.

[00:39:02] EKOW STONE: Yes.

[00:39:05] RAV SINGH: Resources for farmers who want to grow okra is really important to you. When I started growing okra three years ago, there really wasn't much, if anything out there, and even within the

three years, it's not we have a great amount of education around growing things okra, but it is starting to pop up.

[00:39:25] RAV SINGH: For example, the Ontario Government Agriculture Department, they have a resource book on how to grow every crop under the sun. For the first time I saw okra was in it. It doesn't have its own full chapter, but it does get a little mentioned. Yes, that one. So okra is in right now. Seriously, it's so good. I would love to see more, through these new farmer training programs and these resource guides that are available.

[00:39:54] RAV SINGH: We see so much information on all these crops, so let's get people like Ekow and others to develop those resources and lead the workshops at faraway conferences on how to grow, things that. One of the things I really appreciate about EFAO and taking on this project is doing variety trials and

[00:40:16] RAV SINGH: crop trials like this takes up a lot of time. It also can, especially for small scale farmers take up space and when you're trialing and experimenting with crops, it's not a guarantee that you're gonna get a harvest from it that's profitable. So it, it's valuable space that we're giving up. So having

[00:40:37] RAV SINGH: things this, be funded and have money, go to the farmers that are part of these projects is really, really important. I think

[00:40:45] STEPH BENOIT: that makes sense.

[00:40:47] *Incorporating Okra into Community Work*

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[00:40:47] STEPH BENOIT: This is a question is mostly for Ekow, but Rav, I'd love to hear if there's anything you would add. How have you incorporated okra seed saving and breeding into other aspects of your life or your community work?

[00:41:00] EKOW STONE: Other aspects of my life? It's a great question. I mean. We did this art project with a gallery, the University of Toronto, Scarborough, U of T, Scarborough, and it was artist Shannon, and she was doing art, she's a farmer, she has a lot of printing and stuff that. And she knew Fianna and so she invited us to do a workshop and activation and around seeds and stuff that.

[00:41:24] EKOW STONE: And it was we did a workshop in winnowing and we had these machines that we made and really wonderful, I think. I am excited for more opportunities that to come up. The opportunity really isn't the fact that we were based in Toronto for so long, which is as people, not as a farm, but we were in Toronto for quite a while and made a lot of connections there.

[00:41:44] EKOW STONE: We're still connected to those communities because we're five minutes away from a Go Train station. Right. So I'm excited to get some intentional. Community engagement going on with different people. I don't know what that's gonna look like. And I've learned not to force myself into collaborations and let it happen naturally at it's due time.

[00:42:07] EKOW STONE: And it's due pace more than anything. It's been really exciting to connect with people through food and through seed and through for example, the callaloo. That we grow now, that is part of our rotation since 2022, has been seed that I got from Ghana and then saved here, adapted here. And my partner, her mother, she's Jamaican.

[00:42:32] EKOW STONE: My partner loves callaloo, and now I'm bringing this callaloo to her mother. And people in the church community really, really love it. And it's cool to see how. This seed that was given to me on the other side of the Atlantic has come here. And then I grow it here and then I bring it into the community and they love it.

[00:42:52] EKOW STONE: And then she grew it out on her balcony and then it went to flour and she saved those seeds. And it's it's a tale of

time, but to actually see it happening and being participant in it and see it go through its own dynamics has been really, really inspiring. That's definitely one of the questions I think I glossed over.

[00:43:10] EKOW STONE: 'cause I think I'll. I'm so farm obsessed right now. I'm to be a hundred percent real with y'all. I'm , it's really happening this year for 2025 for our farm business.

[00:43:19] RAV SINGH: Should be,

[00:43:20] EKOW STONE: yeah. So how it impacts or connects in these deeper ways.

[00:43:24] STEPH BENOIT: Rev, is there anything that you wanna add to that or any ways that you feel this work has found its way into other aspects of your life or your community work?

[00:43:33] RAV SINGH: It has definitely infiltrated my life in some really interesting ways. Community education has always been really important to me, and it's central to the farm and the work I do. So I've had a lot of great opportunities over the last few years to. Do gardening workshops at the library, different community spaces whenever they let me.

[00:43:55] RAV SINGH: I always talk about okra and people are really excited about it 'cause they wanna know how to grow it at home. So that's been really exciting. And last year, the Mississauga Seed Library, I was able to do a okra workshop for them and it's so fun. And for the first time they had okra. People were really excited to take it, I guess.

[00:44:14] RAV SINGH: We'll, I'll see in a few weeks when they reopen their library for this year, if there's more exchanges happening. There is a group of youth in my community in the region of Peel that we're really excited about okra. So we all got together and we're talking one day and we were, it would be so amazing if we were able to, to talk about and write about how to grow okra from our different cultures and communities.

[00:44:36] RAV SINGH: We collaborated on creating this. Mini Okra Garden guide. Initially we were , it's gonna be a page, whatever, but people were so excited. We had a fundraiser and we were able to write a whole, it's not a book, but it's a few pages very beautifully, graphically designed. We even got to work with a newcomer centre who

[00:44:59] RAV SINGH: hired their clients as translators, and we got it translated into six different languages. So right now we're working with the library system in the region of Peel to get some circulated.

[00:45:11] *Future of Okra Farming*

[00:45:11] RAV SINGH: I have this dream that's called the okra train. All of these I hope, are steps to get there. So what I envision for the future of okra is

[00:45:22] RAV SINGH: having some program where local farmers all clump their products together, including working with some fabulous okra farmers and getting okra in these food boxes that are set up, there's stations set up at all the go train stops. So people as they're commuting, when they're getting going home from work, they can walk by the table as they get off the train to their car and get this really cool

[00:45:50] RAV SINGH: local produce box that includes okra.

[00:45:54] STEPH BENOIT: It's genuinely so exciting and it fills my cup so much to hear about how passionate you both are about this and the energy and excitement that you have around it. It is really beautiful. So I hope this year is bountiful in all of the ways that it can be. And thank you so, so much for taking the time to do this today.

[00:46:13] RAV SINGH: Thanks for giving us the time to talk about okra.

[00:46:16] STEPH BENOIT: Seed Heads is produced by The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security, a program of SeedChange whose

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