



SEEDHEADS TRANSCRIPT

Episode 22: LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED English

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[00:00:00] STEPH BENOIT: Hey, and welcome to Seed Heads, 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 Anishinabeg people.

Music

[00:00:43] STEPH BENOIT: Today's episode was such a joy to record. My inner botany and native plant nerd was having such a field day. On this one, I had the opportunity to speak with Latifa Pelletier-Ahmed. Latifa is a botanist, artist, educator, and the co-owner of ALCLA [00:01:00] Native Plants. She joined me today from Treaty Seven Territory on the land of the Blackfoot Confederacy, near Carstairs, Alberta.

[00:01:07] STEPH BENOIT: We talked about the winding path that brought Latifa to ALCLA native plants. Some of the unique challenges and opportunities of growing wild plants instead of domesticated crops. The rich tapestry of native plants across Canada, and opportunities for other types of farmers and gardeners to get involved in growing native plants and seeds.

[00:01:27] STEPH BENOIT: I really just wish I could go on a guided plant walk with Latifa and have her point out to me everything that she knows, but unfortunately, I'm thousands of kilometres away from her. So this conversation was the next best thing. I really hope you enjoy listening as much as I did recording.

[00:01:44] *Introduction and Opening Remarks*

[00:01:44] STEPH BENOIT: Thank you so much for making the time to do this.

[00:01:46] STEPH BENOIT: I realize that farmers are very busy people and even as the snow is still on the ground, this is a time when lots of things are awakening and stirring. So thank you for making the time to be here tonight.

[00:01:58] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Thank you so much for having me. I'm [00:02:00] excited to be here.

[00:02:01] *Journey into Seed Work*

[00:02:01] STEPH BENOIT: I wanted to start off by asking you, what called you to this type of seed work instead of more maybe traditional agricultural crops?

[00:02:11] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Honestly, I was never that drawn to working in other types of agriculture. I think it took several years of doing this before I even admitted that I was a farmer. Like I just didn't see myself as a farmer. And I think since doing this work, I can recognize that farmers come in all shapes and sizes.

[00:02:33] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: It's not just like a stereotypical image and there's all different kinds of ethos behind it. Like with regards to my background, I have a background in botany as well as herbal

medicine.

[00:02:46] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I actually was able to do a master's degree in herbal medicine, which is very unusual. And so I really have an appreciation for the complexity of plants. I've always been interested in [00:03:00] ethnobotany and how people use plants and interact with wild plants.

[00:03:04] *Embracing Native Plants*

[00:03:04] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And I think that background of just being so fascinated by how people have interacted with plants around the world for millennia is a big part of what interested me to go further on this path of getting to know plants.

[00:03:22] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: For example, I studied in England and we studied. primarily Eurasian species that many people might be familiar with, like dandelion for example. and yeah, some of those plants are weeds here. As I really went down that path of coming back to Canada and trying to work in that field, I did teach at Pacific Ribbon College for a couple years as well, in Victoria.

[00:03:47] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I realized that there wasn't really a relationship with the plants that are from here and grow here, this landscape, obviously for Indigenous folks from many different nations there is, but for settlers there isn't the [00:04:00] same kind of connection. And I felt like that was problematic.

[00:04:04] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And I began to question some of what I was talking about, what I was promoting. I realized I was mainly working with weeds and which could be a good thing if you're removing weeds, but you don't really wanna be spreading weeds and invasive species, that's not really a good idea. So I think I really began to think more critically, but I know now today how important those Indigenous plants are to the biodiversity as a whole and so I am even more fueled to want to support them because they're the underdogs at the end of the day in

terms of needing recognition by the broad population and needing to be identified as having value.

[00:04:46] STEPH BENOIT: Oh, so beautifully said. I feel like once you get to know the native plants in your area you're like, hey, how come no one's been planting this? This is so cool. It's not all just the typical ones. Once you find some rare spring ephemeral or [00:05:00] something, it's such a cool experience that really changes things. I guess then building off of that, how did you get involved in seed work, starting from the basis of herbal medicine and botany?

[00:05:12] *Acquiring the Business*

[00:05:12] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Ultimately the company ALCLA native plants that myself and, my partner, Ben Hartney, run together was being sold by an older couple, Dr. Al Fedkenheuer and his wife Pat. They were in their seventies at the time they started the company in 1992.

[00:05:33] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: They literally ran the company out of their backyard. Al has a PhD in agriculture and he worked a lot in reclamation. A big part of why he was producing these plants was to make them available for high quality restoration work. They really made a lot of inroads ultimately in the local gardening community. And they've been involved with the Calgary Horticultural [00:06:00] Society, for example, for decades. And we continue that legacy. We continue to work with them and to support them and to offer educational opportunities through them. Because at the scale he was doing it, at the end of the day, is very amenable to a retail kind of type of selling plants. So I think it was just an opportunity, like I don't think I would've just started it out of nothing. And I think it's, unfortunately, it is really hard to do that because, for example, we took on over 150 species. We bought the plants and the seeds and that's decades of work.

[00:06:36] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: That was like over 30 years of work. And for someone to start that from scratch, it's not to, and to be able to have a viable business is very difficult. It's almost impossible in a

way.

[00:06:47] *Learning the Ropes of Seed Saving*

[00:06:47] STEPH BENOIT: So did you know much about saving seeds before you bought the business, or was it like a baptism by fire situation?

[00:06:54] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I didn't know very much. I didn't grow up like growing plants, so it was more [00:07:00] Ben, who he grew up with, like with a traditional vegetable garden. It was an important part of relating with his family, with his mother. They had a food garden, they had fresh vegetables from that. I think she's always loved gardening and so he had a lot more knowledge.

[00:07:15] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: He volunteered for Community Crop

[00:07:18] STEPH BENOIT: like a community garden or? Exactly.

[00:07:20] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: garden. So it's a community garden in Calgary and he started at a little seed saving plots in there.

[00:07:26] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: He was always interested. although I have the background in botany, You don't really learn about growing plants. You learn more about the theory and the science about, plants once they're

[00:07:35] STEPH BENOIT: already there.

[00:07:36] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: The components of a cell and genetics and the biochemistry, but growing them, not really.

[00:07:41] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And that was more him and he studied landscape horticulture at Old's College, so he brought more of that information. And I know a lot now, but yeah. Initially I didn't really know what I was doing. I think we just jumped into it.

[00:07:56] STEPH BENOIT: Wow. That's so cool. Yeah, [00:08:00] it sounds like you had really compatible skillsets beyond just being life partners.

[00:08:04] STEPH BENOIT: Business partners seem to line up nicely for this.

[00:08:07] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Yeah, it is challenging to learn to work with your partner, but

[00:08:11] STEPH BENOIT: yeah, that's probably like a whole 'nother podcast episode.

[00:08:14] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: But absolutely, like we have very complimentary skill sets and that continues to be the case. So I think I've taken over in some ways more of the growing as Ben has able to take more of the operations and construction and building like structural things and stuff.

[00:08:30] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: So yeah, we continue to have a division of labor that is very complimentary.

[00:08:35] STEPH BENOIT: Oh, that's awesome. So you mentioned that Ben started, with more like vegetable seeds.

[00:08:41] *Challenges and Differences in Native Seed Production*

[00:08:41] STEPH BENOIT: How would you say native seed production differs from domesticated vegetable grain and just other horticultural seed growing?

[00:08:49] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Yeah, that's a great question. I'm sure there's some crossover in terms of cleaning and storing those like basic seed science things. But when you're working with [00:09:00] wild seed, the biggest difference is it's undomesticated seed. It's genetically diverse seed. And so you're working with seeds that are not predictable.

[00:09:10] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: They can have staggered germination, meaning you plant a seed, and we see this all the time. Some seeds may come up right away, Often it could take a year or multiple years before the seed germinates and seeds continue to germinate over successive generations. There's also complex processes of breaking dormancy.

[00:09:29] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Mm-hmm. Now this can exist in like more, think about a pea or something - that's a legume family plant. If you went to a wild pea, like those plants need scarification. They need the seed coat (scratched), in order for water to penetrate into the embryo for the seed to imbibe. But the modern seeds have been bred that they don't need scarification.

[00:09:54] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: People often think that when you soak peas or beans in a glass of water overnight, [00:10:00] you're scarifying them. You're not, because they're imbibing. The seed coat has been bred to be so thin, it no longer requires mechanical scarification, but for a wild legume, you absolutely have to scarify them, otherwise they won't imbibe at all.

[00:10:15] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Mm-hmm. And so it's quite different. And so I think that's a big obstacle. But it's also what we want. We as growers, we strive for genetic diversity because we do come from a place of conservation.

[00:10:29] *Conservation and Biodiversity*

[00:10:29] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And so you don't wanna narrow down the gene pool because what does a gene pool offer when it's diverse?

[00:10:35] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: A full range of genes. the ability to resist climate change, the ability to resist pests. The ability to adapt and thrive. If we lose that, and that's why we have seed banks that keep wild stock of conventional foods and vegetables, that's critical because we have

to draw on those genes. If a new disease comes, there can be maybe a few individuals in the population that have [00:11:00] natural resistance and that's precious. Genetic diversity is something that's evolved over thousands of years and we have to safeguard it because if we lose it, we cannot get it back.

[00:11:11] STEPH BENOIT: Mm-hmm. Wow. I think that also speaks, indirectly, to how important it is to have these living seed banks where it's one thing to have it stored away, but to have people continuing to work with it year after year, season after season, and to grow it out and to let it adapt to the changing climate conditions and the changing pest landscape is so important as well.

[00:11:32] STEPH BENOIT: You can't just sort of like, it's good to have that as a fail safe, but I think, a little bit more proactive approach is letting these plants evolve as our circumstances also change. In terms of, are there different regulations for growing native seeds than horticultural seeds or grain seeds?

[00:11:52] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I think there's no regulations really. I think maybe for a few species that are used in [00:12:00] reclamation, and off the top of my head, I wouldn't know. But they're not regulated the way agricultural seeds are. There could potentially be more, I don't know, I wouldn't wanna say what that should or shouldn't be.

[00:12:12] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I think we're at such an early stage in this industry that it really does need to develop, and grow. But, there are definitely barriers like, because, native seed growers don't have access to the same kinds of subsidies. They also don't have access to insurance on crops. So it's a much higher risk because of that.

[00:12:34] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Native seed in this country, I say specifically in Canada because there's a lot more support in the United States in terms of government and funding hundreds of millions of dollars go into the native seed industry in the United States and also tons of research, most of the research we draw on comes from the United States.

[00:12:56] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: So in this country, there's a real

[00:13:00] paucity or lack of understanding of native seed and good quality research. And, there has been some cultivars established, for specific purposes.

[00:13:11] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: For example, maybe slender wild rye. There's different cultivars that could be used for.. the idea is to find a genetic strain that could be useful in this particular reclamation setting. So there's a few individual species. Again, off the top of my head, I don't, that's not something I think about every day and have to reference the documentation about it.

[00:13:31] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: But yeah, so there isn't a lot. And even with rare species, we don't work with extremely rare species. There should be more regulation on how those are maintained. Again, there's a lot more regulation from my understanding in the United States with regards to rare species, especially on private land.

[00:13:51] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: In Canada, rare species legislation is only applicable to federal land. So rare species, even if they're extremely rare, like we [00:14:00] have species that are only native to Alberta and Montana, for example, or only native between Alberta and Saskatchewan. Those species are not really that protected that well in terms of legislation if it's not on public land.

[00:14:14] STEPH BENOIT: That's really interesting. I was not aware about that. What are some of the things that have surprised you about growing and selling native plants and native seeds?

[00:14:25] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Some of those things I just mentioned, I think realizing that there isn't, there's so little research, there's so little understanding.

[00:14:36] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: The government acknowledges on their website that native, I work in the prairie, so the prairies, I'm gonna focus on prairies and grassland, but they acknowledge that this is the most endangered ecosystem in the country, but there isn't really any initiative to support it, or very limited, there's not enough incentive for people to

stop plowing it under, it's still being plowed under and destroyed every year.

[00:14:58] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I heard a statistic [00:15:00] recently, like in the past 25 years, 25 million acres have been lost, or hectares might be hectares in Canada. It's a really ongoing issue. So despite the fact that we know that this is happening, we don't know most of the species, we don't understand how they grow. We don't understand how to conserve them.

[00:15:18] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: We don't understand the specific relationships between wildlife and these plants. The Xerces Society, which is a pollinator conservation group, again, an American based organization, they say on their website that, and I've seen it in different sources, but they promote this statistic that 90% of insects have a specific relationship with native plants.

[00:15:41] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: We don't know most of those relationships, we don't even know all the insects there are. In Alberta, we have over 2000 species of moths. Most of them, we don't know what their host plants are. So it's shocking to me that we're still destroying habitat that we don't even understand how to take [00:16:00] care of it, how it works, how it functions.

[00:16:02] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And then that's just, we're not even thinking about the microorganism level because there's all kinds of mycorrhizal fungi that are very specific with native plants. And again, there's some work being done in the US particularly on the Tallgrass Prairie, perhaps the most endangered ecosystem in North America, less than 1% is left. And those are critical. And there are people researching and looking at how we can make those commercially available and share them and put those back in the landscape. But. Locally, we really don't know. And again, we've lost most of it, so it really begs the question, why isn't there more concern about understanding what's going on?

[00:16:41] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I didn't realize how serious the conservation issue is in this country and in the world. I had no idea. It's not something we learn in school.

[00:16:51] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: it's just glossed over. And I think many people driving through the prairies think that that's prairie, but in most cases it's not. It's cropland [00:17:00] and that's not the same thing. Most people don't even know what a native prairie looks like, to be honest, which is pretty shocking.

[00:17:07] STEPH BENOIT: Yeah. What would a native prairie look like in your area? What would be some of the plants you would find there?

[00:17:14] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: In our area. We're in a fescue dominant area, so you'd see things like a rough fescue. It could be foothills rough fescue or plains rough fescue, blue grandma grass.

[00:17:26] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Certain species, because of land use practices will shift. Others seem to disappear from the landscape over time, depending on how the land is used. The thing about a diverse prairie landscape is it's just so biodiverse.

[00:17:39] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: There's just so many species. They may seem small, but are, purple prairie clover and different milks and we have native species that are – like fall dandelions that look like dandelions, but are actually not – and native thistles as well. that was one that I wanted to bring up because most people really only know invasive thistles [00:18:00] and they don't even, I read an article that it's actually causing a decline in, native thistles because people can't tell the difference

[00:18:08] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: They'll eradicate wild thistles 'cause they do look very similar. There's so many violets and we have native iris in this province and that one's quite rare. But, yeah, just like a huge range. And they can be very long living.

[00:18:22] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I think specifically of Akina, which is not native to my area.

[00:18:27] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: It's a more Midwestern species. But I remember reading a paper, Plants like almost 200 years old, so they can be really long lived. Just because they're small doesn't mean that they don't have a strong longevity and can live a very long time.

[00:18:40] STEPH BENOIT: Mm-hmm. It's so beautiful to listen to you describe it because there's a, a richness and a passion with which you speak about these plants where, if you're a, a coastal girly, it might just be like, that looks like a lot of grass, but hearing you paint this picture, I'm like, oh my gosh, I wanna know the milk vetches.

[00:18:58] STEPH BENOIT: And I wanna know [00:19:00] some of these ones that are like, some of these species that you're speaking of that Yeah. Maybe to the untrained eye, it just is not as remarkable. But once you like, begin a relationship with the plant, it really becomes something special.

[00:19:11] STEPH BENOIT: Also something that I've never thought about before, this exact question. One of those I was today years old when I realized that there's like specific, mycorrhizal fungi that have very specific relationships with the plants that they grow on.

[00:19:26] STEPH BENOIT: That seems, now that I say it out loud, very intuitive, but it's something where it is sort of like, oh yes, all mycorrhizal fungi is just like garden variety. It's just one network that goes out everywhere. And obviously that's not the case, but I guess it's never something that I had thought about. There's very specific relationships between plants and insects and all that sort of stuff. Why wouldn't there be very specific relationships between plants and fungi? That's. So cool. Now I'm like, that should be a whole 'nother, so surely someone's doing a PhD on that, right? Can I find 'em and have them on the podcast next?

[00:19:59] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: [00:20:00] For sure. I have the information somewhere about the people doing the research on the tallgrass. I'm sure I could dig it up somewhere.

[00:20:05] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: 'Cause yeah, in the US they are looking at making some of those mycorrhizal fungi, like which plants they support the best and they're trying to make them available for the prairie restoration. So that's incredible.

[00:20:16] STEPH BENOIT: Yeah. Going back here a little bit, but when you were talking about the intensity of the process of scarifying seeds, how do

you, if you're working with a backyard gardener, how do you set the expectations around what

[00:20:31] STEPH BENOIT: germinating a native seed will look like and how it might be different than a domesticated plant.

[00:20:38] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: We try to provide as much transparency as possible with regards to what to expect, and we're continually evolving this. I think we can add more information. We do have information on our website.

[00:20:52] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: We have an article called "Troubleshooting Native Seed Germination", which is very long and in a way it's meant to [00:21:00] highlight how complex it is. one thing we try to encourage people to do is, work with nature if we do artificial stratification. So for listeners who don't know what that means, it's, putting seeds in

[00:21:13] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: through a winter process, they have to be imbibed, they have to be moist, and we put them in the fridge so they mimics winter. And so that triggers germination in those seeds. And for the average gardener, we encourage them to start them outside. Use natural processes rather than, it can be a bit more labor intensive to try to do everything manually.

[00:21:33] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: That doesn't mean people can't do it, but we want it to feel accessible for people. We do encourage that if we know a species or a seed lot, because we work with the same seed lots that we sell, like we grow them ourselves. And we can say this species has a very staggered germination.

[00:21:51] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: We've experienced that, or we know that it can take up to two years for this seed to germinate. Historically, we've tried to prioritize selling [00:22:00] seeds that are easier to germinate, that don't have difficult dormancy, that you can germinate most of the seeds in two to three weeks.

[00:22:07] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: But over time, I feel like it's nice to

make the broader spectrum of species available to people. And they can decide whether they want to try some of the more difficult to grow species. We try to support people and definitely we tell them what seed treatments

[00:22:24] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: we have used to get the seeds to germinate. But even ourselves growing the same seed lot, we'll get different results depending what month we germinated or who knows what small micro conditions occurred. We always recommend to start in the spring for a lot of species.

[00:22:41] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: 'cause we have found, like if we start a seed in May or June, it will not germinate. But if we had started it in March, it will. And so the temperature variation is really critical for a lot of species.

[00:22:52] STEPH BENOIT: Mm-hmm.

[00:22:54] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Yeah.

[00:22:55] STEPH BENOIT: I have right now a drawer in my fridge that's basically all just paw paw seeds.

[00:23:00] STEPH BENOIT: A plant that you don't really get usually too far north or this far north in Ontario, usually you find it in like the very southern tip of Ontario, but it has the most delicious fruit. And with climate change, it's making a little bit of a northward migration. Anyway, I have just like the paw paw seed drawer because I'm like, no, they're spending the winter in there.

[00:23:20] STEPH BENOIT: Please don't disturb them. But it can be really fun and really joyous to interact with native plants like that, where it is more of a challenge, like if you've gotten past, just sort of like, yeah, plopping the seeds in a quarter inch deep and blah, blah, blah. Then it can be like for the maybe adventurous gardener, fun to interact with your seeds in a more involved way.

[00:23:40] STEPH BENOIT: Do you find that you sell mostly to, or who,

who do you find you mostly sell to?

[00:23:47] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: We have a big retail audience. We do sell our products online and we ship them. Most of our customers are in Alberta, and then there's a good amount in Saskatchewan, but occasionally we get [00:24:00] orders from Ontario, from BC, definitely eastern BC there's a lot of species crossover.

[00:24:05] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Despite how prolific the horticultural industry is in BC, there's not that many native plant suppliers, as you would think. We recently supplied seeds to the East Kootenay Invasive Species Council and they came to us to get species that were appropriate for their area because they weren't able to get them locally.

[00:24:25] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Again, these species do have broad ranges as well, so they can be appropriate over a large area. We always encourage people to plant local, but sometimes that species isn't available. So you have no choice but to go to the closest supplier. We are very fortunate because we're in such a niche market that we get to work with, businesses as well as government organizations, we supply to municipalities, we supply to parks like federal parks.

[00:24:55] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: It is a unique opportunity to be in, because even as a very small [00:25:00] business, we're able to work with some very large, buyers because there's no one else really producing these species, or very few people,

[00:25:08] STEPH BENOIT: mm-hmm.

[00:25:10] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Yeah.

[00:25:10] STEPH BENOIT: Or do you sell any native plugs or is everything that you sell seeds?

[00:25:15] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Plugs. So both, like most of our revenue comes from live plant sales. Okay. And then, I don't know, maybe 25% comes from seeds. Most of our revenue comes from the live plants,

and there's a lot of people who would rather, and we ship the plants too.

[00:25:31] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: there's a lot of people who don't want to try growing the seeds or have tried and haven't been successful, or some species, I know they're very hard to grow. I understand.

[00:25:43] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I don't expect many people to ever germinate them, to be honest. I know how hard it is.

[00:25:48] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Mm. Yeah, then we can make that available for folks.

[00:25:51] *Cultural and Traditional Influences*

[00:25:51] STEPH BENOIT: have there been any traditional or cultural perspectives on seed saving that have influenced your approach, either from your own background, your partner's background, [00:26:00] or other communities that you've interacted with?

[00:26:03] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Yeah, absolutely. Like we're in Niitsítapi, or Siksikáí'tsitapi or the Blackfoot Confederacy territory and, we've had an opportunity, first of all, we're really lucky that we do get a lot of support from the local Indigenous community in a lot of different ways and people recommend us. And, that makes me feel good that we're doing something helpful and we can support a positive future for all people and support truth and reconciliation as well.

[00:26:35] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: So that's something that makes me feel really, meaningful for me as a part of my work, but definitely we've had an opportunity to speak with knowledge keepers and elders about different kinds of protocols. For example, with seed harvesting, I have been told to gift tobacco as a gift and to be grateful.

[00:26:53] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I seed collect delicately. I'm very careful. I do not kill any [00:27:00] wild plants. harvest sustainably. We do collect our seeds and we're hand collecting. There's a lot of very tactile,

very manual things. We're not going in with machines. We're not collecting thousands of pounds of seeds. It's a very non-aggressive, very gentle process of collecting seeds.

[00:27:18] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And so we do try to honor and respect cultural practices on the territories that we live. To be honest, I don't always remember to give tobacco, but I work on improving that. I've been told to do it, and I want to do that to be grateful. One of the knowledge keepers that has influenced me a lot, his Blackfoot name is Api'soomaahka, which means Running Coyote, William Singer III on the Kainai First Nation.

[00:27:45] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: One of the four members of the Blackfoot Confederacy and he has a project called Naapi's Garden if folks want to Google it and get more information. But, one thing he taught me was, you don't pick from the [00:28:00] first plant. He was talking about actually harvesting for food or medicine, but you don't pick the first plant and so I try to apply the same kinds of thinking when I'm out harvesting. Obviously with seeds it's not a destructive process. If I saw one plant on the roadside, I might pick it because I also recognize that that landscape is a disturbed landscape and me taking that seed could be an opportunity to save those genetics for the future generation.

[00:28:27] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: So I look at things in a complex way. I really do try to honour those principles and ideas, as gentle a presence on the landscape as I can and not like, have very little impact, as though I'd not have not been there,

[00:28:42] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: What also differs from our industry is I have a background, I study taxonomy in my degree, and that's so critical for what we do and what other types of farmers don't need to be taxonomists to, to grow plants, but to wild collect seeds and do it accurately and not have invasive species, not [00:29:00] have weird lookalikes to know and understand like the kind of populations that we're working with

[00:29:05] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: you have to have that kind of skillset. I'm fortunate enough I was able to work in jobs where I was

identifying plants previous to this so that I have a strong skillset in taxonomy and I'm a good taxonomist. We can trust the quality of our products and that's really important.

[00:29:21] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And that's where that can become a problem in this industry because Lookalikes can get substituted. And we do see that, with large scale seed, that the incorrect species are being sold as native species.

[00:29:34] STEPH BENOIT: Hmm. I feel like you'd be such a fun person to go on a walk with.

[00:29:37] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Used to lead plant walks and Yeah. I don't have time really for it anymore. Again, if I could duplicate, clone myself. Absolutely. People, people want this information. There needs to be more people sharing it.

[00:29:50] STEPH BENOIT: Yeah, absolutely.

[00:29:52] STEPH BENOIT: I remember reading this study that I wanna say it was like Swiss kindergarteners. It's been a while, so don't quote me. But it was [00:30:00] talking about if they just knew the names of things, they felt more affection towards it. So if they asked them what their favourite plant or animal was before they would say like a tiger or something that they had no connection to, they'd never seen in real life.

[00:30:12] STEPH BENOIT: But once they learned the name of some of the animals around them, they would start to name those things as their favourite animals. And I think about that a lot of just the power of naming things and calling things by their name to know who you're in relationship with, to know who's around you and how that instantly brings you into a relationship with them in a very different way.

[00:30:31] STEPH BENOIT: It's so powerful. I love when people can identify things.

[00:30:34] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: No, a hundred percent. I feel like I've heard this, people describe this before and I think I've had my own

transformational experience like this. When you see a wall of green and transforms into a whole collection of different friends and individuals you could have relationships with.

[00:30:51]

[00:30:51] STEPH BENOIT: Oh yeah. Oh, so beautiful. I was also, as you were mentioning your harvesting principles, I happen to have on my [00:31:00] little unofficial mic stand here, a copy of Robin Wall Kimmerer, the Service Berry. Which I mean, I'm shamelessly plugging everything by Robin Wall Kimmerer because I think people who are into this sort of stuff would love it.

[00:31:10] STEPH BENOIT: But she was the first author who introduced me to the idea of the honourable harvest and not taking the first of anything, not taking the last of anything, and living in a very reciprocal way. And even when you were describing. Sort of like moving gently on the land. It was making me think of it's not even that you're just leaving no trace that you're leaving a positive trace, like what you're describing.

[00:31:31] STEPH BENOIT: It's not just like being neutral. It's actually being in relationship with these things in a very beautiful way of trying to help protect their genetics and trying to undo some of the harm that rapid urbanization and all these other factors are causing. So I think you should give yourself credit for, you're not just leaving no trace, you're leaving a very positive trace.

[00:31:51]

[00:31:51] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: That's what I was looking for. Leave no trace. Thank you.

[00:31:53] STEPH BENOIT: the world is better off with humans living in sustainable relationship with the things around them. So I think you're sort of [00:32:00] like embodying that.

[00:32:02] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Yeah, a hundred percent. I think. That's very, very true. And I feel like in these times, which can feel very

dark and hopeless, this is something empowering and something you can very quickly see results in.

[00:32:17] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: You can very quickly see an increase in biodiversity. You can very quickly see new species of bees and butterflies. You never saw before and you didn't know existed just by creating space for them. It's something that anyone and everyone can do. And the more people who do it, the greater impact will be to help support life.

[00:32:38] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: We don't have to live in a concrete world that we are marketed ideas that have no relationship with the actual land we live on. We are strong, we are powerful. a friend of mine whose Cree was saying, we believe she was speaking from her cultural background, that we believe that people are essential part of this earth.

[00:32:57] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: That they're not something bad that shouldn't be here. [00:33:00] That they are part of it. completely echoing what you're saying, that, it's just about reconnecting, rebuilding those relationships.

[00:33:07] STEPH BENOIT: Mm. I'm definitely echoing whatever she was saying the other way around because I feel like a lot of my thoughts have been influenced by, Indigenous world views and Indigenous authors, so all the credit to them. Okay. Have we, how are we doing for time? Yeah. Okay. we have time for some more questions. Do you see the demand for native seed growing in your area?

[00:33:28] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I think yes, absolutely. Absolutely because for the exact reasons we talked about. More people are becoming conscious. I'm a big fan too of like the work of Doug Tallamy and yeah, this book Nature's Best Hope and things like that. It's something positive. I think people really need and want positivity, so it's something positive people can get involved with.

[00:33:50] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: It's a great way for people of all ages to engage. It's a great way for children to grow up with a different kind of relationship with the world around them. From [00:34:00] the

point of view of the average consumer, absolutely, the demand is growing. We have new organizations popping up. For example, there's Bee City Canada, in Toronto, I believe is their headquarters. We work with them. They're promoting this importance of supporting native bees and how we can do that by planting, of course, native plants and allowing space for them the different types of habitats that they have. Recently, a few years ago in Alberta, there's now a Native Bee Council started to again, promote native bees and actually like evidence-based practices because unfortunately, you can buy a Bee hotel off a shelf,

[00:34:39] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: it doesn't necessarily mean that it's made to a standard that's actually healthy for bees. So you need to have an evidence-based, you can't just like, know. People probably are well intentioned, but it's really important when we are working with other living beings to do so in a way that benefits them and is respectful towards them.

[00:34:57] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: There is more openness to [00:35:00] respecting and understanding and a willingness to work with Indigenous ways of knowing. So for example, hospitals in Calgary, I don't know how the project is going long term, but they were putting in traditional medicine plants for their Indigenous patients to be able to access and use and have those relationships.

[00:35:17] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: That's something we wouldn't have seen, even 10 years ago. This is something recent. So those things of course create demand. I feel incredibly lucky and privileged that I can contribute positively to that, that I can share and share plants that ultimately provide healing for people, and that are culturally significant for them.

[00:35:35] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Bring that back into their environment. That's so powerful. I feel incredibly lucky that I can play a role in that.

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[00:35:47] Future Vision and Hopes

[00:35:47] STEPH BENOIT: what's your vision or hope for this realm of working with native plants? Where would you like to see this going?

[00:35:55] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I think I would like to see a world where [00:36:00] native plants and Indigenous plants are recognized by many organizations and individuals for their value

[00:36:11] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: More people know what they are, can recognize them. There are many people that could not name a native plant if you ask them. They never learned that. I think that's a problem with our education system, why aren't these really critical, important things being taught? I know some schools today are doing that, but I didn't learn about that when I went through grade school. I think, it's still like really common practice, for example, when a road goes in, like just near me, they did some road work near a wetland and the county land and there are so many beautiful native plants in that area. People don't see them. They destroyed them, bulldozed them, built their flooding mitigation thing and then seeded non-native Eurasian grasses, which is most of what our landmass is covered with today. [00:37:00] Native plants do not cover, when I'm talking about grassland, most of the landmass, non-native plants do. And so that's so sad and it's so depressing, and I'm like, you just bulldozed something beautiful, destroyed it, didn't even notice, didn't shed a tear, weren't even sad.

[00:37:18] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: You were totally oblivious to it, didn't care, and then replaced it with something cheap and that doesn't support biodiversity and that will ultimately probably spread into the adjacent wild areas and decrease habitat in the long term for those remnant populations. It's really sad and I would really love for that awareness to be there.

[00:37:39] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: and there's barriers, like one thing I thought of are the municipal bylaws that make it illegal for people to not mow lawns when those offer very little from biodiversity really. And yeah, there's a big industry that thrives on turf grass. But can that shift, can we shift the conversation?

[00:37:57] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Can we transition to more sustainable

[00:38:00] horticulture and those individuals can become innovators too. They can participate. It doesn't have to be us against them. It's really being open to doing something different, being open to innovating.

[00:38:11] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Because, as much as small individuals are important, these bigger structures need to see the value, and put their money where their mouth is, it is more expensive for native seed.

[00:38:21] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: That's the truth for all the reasons I mentioned, it's harder to grow. It's a bigger risk for farmers. Fewer are willing to do it. They're likely to have years where they don't have seed production. Some species definitely don't produce a lot of seed every year. There's all kinds of challenges but that does cost more at the end of the day.

[00:38:39] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: in recognizing the real loss of biodiversity, I think if we really were to calculate when we look at reclamation, there's a very false concept that we can replace what we've taken away. We cannot, you cannot cut down, and I'm sure you know this, like when you talked about the forest in BC, we can't take down an old growth forest and then replace it [00:39:00] tomorrow.

[00:39:00] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: It doesn't happen. We've lost a lot. And so it's the same with native prairie or other wild habitats that have been there for thousands of years. We cannot replace them, really recognizing what the true cost is, because the estimates that are put on a reclamation, are nowhere near the true cost of what is lost.

[00:39:18] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: So there's a very false industry that has allowed us to believe that what we're doing is okay, and we're fixing it. And that public believes that things are being fixed, they're not being fixed.

[00:39:28] STEPH BENOIT: It's not the same thing. It's not a one to one comparison, and you're losing something that takes decades, if not longer, to create. It's a whole web of life. It's not just the individuals it's the sum of everything. Yeah. I feel you there.

[00:39:42] *Ensuring Quality and Ethics in Seed Production* [00:39:42] *Pitfalls in the Native Seed Industry*

[00:39:42] STEPH BENOIT: Are there any pitfalls that you hope the native plant, native seed industry can avoid as it grows? Looking at how things have gone with horticultural crops and that sort of stuff?

[00:39:57] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I think it's more, I don't know because [00:40:00] I don't know enough about industries outside of my own to understand what the trajectory of pitfalls would be. I wanna see strong standards and ethics. For example, a great example is Wild Blue flax.

[00:40:12] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: It's often linen perrenne, which is a Eurasian species of perennial flax, is often marketed as wild blue flax when it's not. And these kinds of unethical practices, or even like selling wildflower seed mixes that have no native plants because there's no regulation on terminology. And the average consumer who doesn't understand very much about the environment wants to do something positive and ends up potentially growing invasive species.

[00:40:38] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: This is very common. A lot of these mixes can contain non-native and sometimes invasive species, I think just like what I would love to see is just a good high quality rigor in terms of perhaps there's protected terms. I don't want there to be barriers of cost because it's so hard for new producers to even exist.

[00:40:56] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: You don't wanna make it like that there's such a huge barrier that they [00:41:00] can't engage. But to make sure that qual there's a high quality product and that the qualities is actually vetted.

[00:41:08] *Challenges and Solutions in Native Seed Industry*

[00:41:08] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Another big problem is like when we

get big projects especially say it's a reclamation, the cheapest thing to put in, gonna be pounds of seed.

[00:41:17] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And a lot of this comes from the United States. Some of it's grown in Canada, but the way that is vetted is through a process called seed certificate of analysis. But closely related species cannot be determined by this methodology. For example, there's a lot of talk about foothills rough fescue* actually being sheep fescue, which is a, again, a Eurasian species that is now considered invasive.

[00:41:42] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I don't think it's regulated as such, it's been introduced all over the entire continent of North America. It was so much so that it was, even it, I know a 2010 paper I was looking at from the USDA said it was native, so there was even a misunderstanding of that. It wasn't native so [00:42:00] well, it takes, to actually identify these plants means there needs to be a plant specimen.

[00:42:05] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And I don't think it's that hard for a grower to include like a plant specimen for a taxonomist to identify accurately along with the seeds. Like why aren't these kinds of practices more across the board? Because we are getting a lot of these substitutes and false things being planted everywhere.

[00:42:23] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: the standard is false in some cases because of the limitations and how it is. So these are so complex, so diverse, and I think we need to have ways of ensuring quality and ensuring that things species are actually what people say they are. And that it's important. I think there's been a long history of, it's okay, we can plant anything.

[00:42:45] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And even a few decades ago in reclamation, anything was planted as long as it was green, then it was covering the ground. It didn't matter whether it was native or not. biodiversity isn't being restored at the same level, especially if we're talking about Prairie because the species aren't [00:43:00] even commercially available.

* *interview correction: this should have been referenced as Rocky Mountain Fescue*

[00:43:01] LATIFA PELLETTIER-AHMED: So how could they be replaced?

[00:43:03] LATIFA PELLETTIER-AHMED: It doesn't add up. But yeah, I would just like to make sure, I think the quality needs to be there and I think we're seeing more traditional nurseries wanting to incorporate native species. There are barriers for them. I'm not in that industry so I can't speak to exactly, like they're used to having a certain planting, so many seeds getting a predictable output.

[00:43:23] LATIFA PELLETTIER-AHMED: It's calculated, it's all very efficient. It keeps the costs really low. want those companies to be accountable for what they're doing because, they could easily just plop in a bunch, they could buy a pound of linen perenne that's super cheap.

[00:43:37] LATIFA PELLETTIER-AHMED: And no one's even selling actual true blue flags on that scale. and then market it at that and tell people that it's native. And I really hope that people self-regulate as well. And that there's an ethics unfortunately, it is already happening. Species that are questionably native or whatever, are being marketed as such.

[00:43:55] LATIFA PELLETTIER-AHMED: So that's something I think that's really important. And I think also [00:44:00] the big pitfall is the cost. And all agriculture, the margins are razor thin and it's even harder as a native plant grower, because there's so much more work involved, there's so much more risk, there's so much more labor and it's very hard for us to compete with the expectation for the price of plants to be, for a plug or something like that.

[00:44:21] LATIFA PELLETTIER-AHMED: I think making room for that in budgets that, the bottom line is more than just the dollar is also important too.

[00:44:28] *Exploring Native Plants and Their Benefits*

[00:44:28] STEPH BENOIT: What are some of your native plants that you grow?

[00:44:32] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Okay, there's so many. Like we grow over 200 species, but I did pre-think, first of all, I just wanna shout it again to the native thistles because this was the first year we grew native thistle seeds.

[00:44:47] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: So I'm very excited to be building more of a relationship with them and promoting them more and creating more awareness between them. On this property where we live, [00:45:00] there was a lot of overgrazing by cattle and we have a big problem with invasive Canada Thistle, very misnamed, Canada Thistle 'cause nothing to do.

[00:45:09] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: It's not from Canada. And mixed in with what we have here, Floodmen's Thistle is one of the native ones here. So we planted some of that. And then, I have a friend who lives on Siksika Nation and one of the members of the Confederacy and we were able to get *Cirsium undulatum*, which I don't remember the common name of that thistle, but that's the one that's germinating right now.

[00:45:32] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: That's my, and that seed we collected in 2020. And I keep putting it off. There's a lot of plants that I keep putting off. at the end of the day we have to focus on what sell, right? We're running a business, but I wanna grow everything. And so I am always like, every year I squeeze in a few more interesting things. Those plants we'll plant in our garden, we'll collect more seed from our goal is to keep them going. But we can't, it's like an obsession. I can't stop and I'm just very, yeah. And there's another species of thistle [00:46:00] that someone gave us seeds

[00:46:01] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: kind of one that is like an alpine thistle and like very leafy, like *Cirsium foliosum*, I think it's called leafy thistle and like really, really big leaves and a huge flower. So those haven't germinated yet. But yeah, I'm really excited to get to know thistles better and they're great poly plants and people get weirded out by things that are spiky and pokey and I'm like, just give them a chance.

[00:46:24] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I understand in certain circumstances, if there's kids running around, it can be a hazard, but I want to see more appreciation for these plants. And then as someone who loves,

like I do grow a lot of these wild plants for food and medicine and I keep deepening my relationship with them in that way.

[00:46:43] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: So I love slender nettle is our species, western species of nettle. slender nettle. I grow that species and I eat them. That's another pokey plant that has a strong tradition of use in Europe and Asia and lots of recipes and [00:47:00] ways you can work with it.

[00:47:01] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Yeah. And why not have perennial vegetables that don't require any watering, any maintenance. They just grow and you get vegetables like very early, mm-hmm. Like in a month from now, I'll be able to harvest my first nettle harvest and eat those vegetables. In our very short growing season in this region, that's very early, yeah. No one else is gonna be having vegetables, maybe chives, which are also a native species. It's a species native to the entire northern hemisphere. There are species like that. But yeah wild mint, like I love wild mint and funny enough there's a researcher from New Jersey who's, we're just selling some wild mint seed for, 'cause they're researching like these novel crops for industry.

[00:47:43] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: So like essential oil production with *Mentha arvensis* or Wild Mint. There are people, looking at these things and thinking of ways we can work with them. And also *Mentha arvensis* is already commercially produced in some countries for oil, but not here, Those are interesting things that [00:48:00] people could get involved with or diversify or have different kinds of, ways

[00:48:05] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: of diversifying agriculture, I think could be really interesting. And one other plant I wanna mention is ground plum, which is a native legume that's perennial and produces edible fruits. They look like little plums, but they taste like snap peas. That's so cool. Why wouldn't you wanna have a productive plant they don't have to plant year after year?

[00:48:26] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: That's always there, that continues to grow and get bigger and get stronger and, and has specific relationships with insects. So you support a broader spectrum of life when you incorporate these individuals. So those are just some of the few examples. I love them all.

[00:48:44] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Yeah. I can't we have cacti, I love our cacti. Like we have, yucca and people will think, oh my gosh, you can grow this in Alberta. Yes you can. And they're slow, be patient. But we just have some incredible plants. We have [00:49:00] plants that are native to Arizona and the Grand Canyon and they grow up here and this is part of their range.

[00:49:05] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And it's just so cool. It's just so fascinating to build these relationships and to see how beautiful a landscape can be because personally I was born in Calgary. I grew up thinking it was like the ugliest city in the world. People say it's beautiful. I was like, this is so ugly. All the yards look exactly the same and have the same 15 plants.

[00:49:27] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And it doesn't have to be that way. We can have amazing, diverse, lush, exciting spaces. Why do we keep trying to plant stuff that's from somewhere else? And the other cool thing about these native plants in our garden is they often get way bigger, like five, 10 times bigger and showier and way more flowers.

[00:49:44] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And they can be just as showy as a commercial plant because they're like, have lots of space and you are maybe being a bit pampered. Yeah. So there, it's so fun. Like I think if people wanna be creative, wanna try something new, wanna [00:50:00] be different and help the environment.

[00:50:02] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I think it's just like a win-win. There's no way you can't win with growing native plants. the worst is that something spreads too much, but yeah. Is that really that bad?

[00:50:13] STEPH BENOIT: Oh my gosh. Yeah. Something that I have personally found with growing native plants in my garden is how resilient they are.

[00:50:20] STEPH BENOIT: I feel like more lazy gardeners need to embrace native plants because it is just like a set it and forget it in a lot of ways. I planted an elderberry bush in my backyard and the first winter that it was in the ground, my dog chewed it down to nubs and I was like, oh my God, it's ruined.

[00:50:37] STEPH BENOIT: And then it came back the next year and it was, six feet tall and I was like, whoa. That came back from little nubs. On a plant walk with someone who's this really talented, botanist and native plant tender. They were like, oh yeah, with elderberry, it's great to cut it down in the fall so that you can use it as green manure. It can really be cut back down.

[00:50:56] STEPH BENOIT: And I was like, man, the dog knew, she knew that this would [00:51:00] be useful, there's not many things that you can have chewed down to a little nub and then they just come back and be six feet tall the next year. So I love the resilience of native plants.

[00:51:10] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Totally. Absolutely. Last year, there were water restrictions in Calgary.

[00:51:15] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I don't know if you heard about the water main break and all that. Regular customers who'd been coming to us, we also have a lot of regulars and I think that's a good sign. It means that people are having positive results and they come back and they wanna keep trying and they wanna keep experiencing it. So we have a lot of repeat customers, so that tells me we're doing something right and people are happy. Mm-hmm. But they're like, yeah, like we didn't have water or garden and it looked so good and it was amazing. I'm so glad we had put these in.

[00:51:40] *Incorporating Native Seeds in Traditional Agriculture*

[00:51:40] STEPH BENOIT: how can vegetable, seed and grain growers and more traditional agricultural farmers engage in native seeds? Do you think there's a way that they can incorporate native seed production into their existing farm plans?

[00:51:58] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I wanna shout out to Skinner Native Seeds. [00:52:00] I'm a big fan of them. They're located in northern Manitoba and they're coming from a traditional farming land and moving that to native seed production. a very interesting company in Canada doing that. A lot of people come at this from a passion point of view, and they take the challenges as they come and they're willing to be innovative and take risks

But there's a lot of ways you can just incorporate them on the landscape. There's a lot of, again, a lot of areas ended up being seeded with these Eurasian grasses and instead of seeding those grasses, choosing native grasses instead. In shelter belts, one can try to include, there's more of a movement to include native species and new shelter belts, and then including wild flowers and wild grasses within those shelter belts so that they can become havens.

[00:52:43] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And there's growing research showing how, having more healthy ecology around crop land decreases pests, increases more beneficial insects. So it can actually be beneficial to the processes that the farmers are actually working with to have healthy, natural spaces around [00:53:00] their crops.

[00:53:00] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: That's, those are things that I've heard about and studies I've heard about. Yeah, I think there's also organizations like, okay. One thing I think I would say is just to start small, be willing to start small. Sometimes people come to us and they wanna convert acres back into Prairie.

[00:53:17] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: But the cost and the scale, it's very expensive and it's very difficult to be successful on a large scale without a lot of weeds. It really depends on your budget, your goals. But I think being able to start small, if you can develop a small healthy patch and then build outwards and be realistic about your goals, I think it can be a lot more sustainable for people and these can just be marginal spaces that can contribute to biodiversity as a whole.

[00:53:43] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I'm not an expert on conventional agriculture, so I don't know enough about all the kinds of equipment folks use, But I think, if you're interested in trying something experimental, there is a need.

[00:53:55] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: For example, in Alberta, there's a new organization called the Southern Alberta Native [00:54:00] Seed Collaborative, and the goal is to try to develop native seed production by local farmers to create a favorable environment for them. Because there is not enough seed to complete restoration projects to a high quality, there just

isn't on the market.

[00:54:14] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Especially, as I said, many species are not available, so we need people to get into it, but we have to create a favorable environment for them. There has to be a way for them to survive and make a living. So getting involved with organizations like that, within the Grassland Restoration Forum, which is another organization in Alberta advocating for grassland.

[00:54:34] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: So look at local organizations and reach out. there's a real need. It's just we need to figure out how to do that in a way that's sustainable, that people can survive and make a living at the same time. And there's definitely people working on that and trying to figure it out.

[00:54:48] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And I think for smaller scale, like market gardeners for example, there's a lot of room to be creative. You could grow wild mint and sell wild mint at your stall, if you have a market stall or something, you could [00:55:00] try things like ground plum, know that it's gonna take you probably three or four years to get a decent crop.

[00:55:06] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Plan for that. Because once that's established, or you could, fireweed, you could make, there's a eastern European recipe or a Russian recipe called Chai. It's so yummy. And it's something that many people may have, European roots, so it's something.

[00:55:20] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: They can connect to their own ancestry through that and they can create recipes. 'cause there's people in Europe that are commercially producing that, why can't we do that here? And just because people aren't familiar with it, I've made it an. Everyone I give it to says it's so tasty. So that's an opportunity.

[00:55:38] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: It's low cost. That plant grows like a weed, and it takes a bit of effort to make it. But if you're creative and you're excited about those kind of things, I think for small scale producers, there's so much room to be experimental, to try new things, to try new herbs. Bee balm, I love bee balm.

[00:55:56] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: It tastes just like oregano or thyme. It's [00:56:00] stronger. Like why we can have that dried. I use bee balm. It tastes the same. And we can start to shift the culture by making these things available. And I think as a grower, like you, you don't have to water that.

[00:56:11] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: You don't have to worry about, the less you water it, the more flavorful an aromatic plant will be. We can find ways that are, culturally appropriate as well, I think is another thing to consider, on that other side of thing, like I, I don't wanna, you don't wanna be the naysayer, but I'm not going to, it wouldn't be my place to make and sell sweetgrass braids for example, and so just being aware that we wanna be doing this in a way that's respectful and supportive, but building, appropriate relationships with native plants and, and allowing, introducing that to the broader population I think could be great opportunities. And, yeah.

[00:56:48] STEPH BENOIT: I love the idea of crops that you can double dip is both like they're native plants and there is a commercial market for consumption or salves or like all these other things that you [00:57:00] can do.

[00:57:00] STEPH BENOIT: You can do both. You can support local biodiversity and also create a product that people are really interested in, in consuming. Yeah.

[00:57:10] *Resources for Native Seed Production*

[00:57:10] STEPH BENOIT: Who or where would you recommend people go to for information about native seed production? Do you have any sort of key resources or networks for getting started if people want to start experimenting with some native seeds?

[00:57:26] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I think a good resource for people to start with is their local native plant council or society. They will have in many cases resources on local growers. They may also help you to understand which species are native and which ones are not 'cause there is a lot of misinformation out there.

[00:57:44] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: In terms of actually growing seed, we use a lot in an American database called RNGR. A lot of it is anecdotal and experiential information. As I said, there's very little research on [00:58:00] germinating a lot of native seeds, that's very different than conventional plants that are heavily studied and have tons of research behind them.

[00:58:08] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: people can also add to that database. People have asked us, you guys should add to it. I have a very long to do list, but one day I'll have to just the time, but definitely that's basically a community driven

[00:58:21] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: RNGR has a plant propagation protocol, I believe it's called. That's a really good resource. Vascan, V-A-S-C-A-N is also a really good database to confirm whether a species is native to your area and what province it's native to. It is considered the most definitive or the best authority in Canada for what is native.

[00:58:44] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And keep in mind, because even the nomenclature, the naming is not always the same in different countries. So like in the US we'll say it's a different name. In Canada, some of these species have been renamed based on genetic research. We always use VASCAN to [00:59:00] name our plants to make sure it's the most UpToDate naming and to make sure that, what we're growing is actually native.

[00:59:06] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Like for example, I like to grow pineapple weed or Kaile, because of my herbal background. It is a species of chamomile and it can be used the same way. It's great for digestion. It's calming, it tastes really good. And it used, many people didn't know where it was from and they would say it's a weed and it's introduced.

[00:59:27] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And VASCAN can now says it's native to BC so I do grow it. We always preface, if it's native to somewhere different, we say BC although it's like on every sidewalk in Alberta. It's this is like a weed, but it's something like, I don't see a harm in growing something that already does really well, that's native to pretty close by.

[00:59:49] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: And it's also something that we as

individuals can benefit from in our garden. So why not, I'm not opposed to that. So yeah, I think, those are some [01:00:00] potential sources and unfortunately there is not like a manual

[01:00:04] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: For tribal nurseries.

[01:00:06] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Again, another, it's a free American publication. And, one of the main authors is Tara Luna. She is from the Blackfeet Nation, which is, so that's the fourth member of the Confederacy of the Blackfoot Nation, but they're in Montana and she has some very interesting, she's the main author of the Tribal Nursery Handbook.

[01:00:25] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: But ultimately, I think that's one of the only handbooks I've seen out there, although it's geared for Indigenous folks, but that has explanations on, how to start a native plant nursery. So that's definitely a potential resource as well.

[01:00:40] STEPH BENOIT: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Thanks so much for sharing your time and your knowledge and I feel like this energy of sort of like, playfulness and experimentation and just a willingness to try things that's really, really infectious. And now I'm like, woo, what can I scheme up to put in my garden this summer?

[01:00:57] STEPH BENOIT: Thank you so much.

[01:00:59] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Thank [01:01:00] you so much for having me, Stephanie. Yeah, I know it can be, there's like moments of heaviness and moments of lightness and, it's a mix of emotions, but I think overall, this world is a positive, exciting, hopeful world. And I think that's the ultimate message.

[01:01:15] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I think I want people to take home with them.

[01:01:17] STEPH BENOIT: thank you. Yeah. Yeah. I feel that so much. I'm so excited.

[01:01:21] *The Importance of Connection to Place*

[01:01:29] STEPH BENOIT: I'm like ridiculously excited for the snow to Mels around here so I can go looking for some jack in the pulpit, which I dunno if you have out in Alberta, but is this, it's like a weird looking like hooded plant and it's like a, a spring ephemeral that you only get in really shaded areas and all this other stuff.

[01:01:39] STEPH BENOIT: I met it for the first time last year and now I'm like, any date now is gonna be out and yeah, it's just, it's so exciting to feel a connection to time and place as well. To feel like, yes, this is what it means to be in spring in Ontario. In this one like this, this is the [01:02:00] only place that you can get this. And I love that groundedness and yeah, yeah, just sense of place.

[01:02:06] STEPH BENOIT: 'cause like man, the world sometimes is just very homogenous and it's really cool to find things that are like unique to a certain spot.

[01:02:14] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: Exactly. I think a hundred percent. I feel so much more, I never lived so much in sync with the seasons as I do now, but it's so true because we have been homogenized and even as a country and through the process of colonialism like Canada, but it's such a huge country and there's so many unique things to me that is our real identity the unique places that we live. even 20 kilometers from here are different plants that are here. And that's so amazing to me that there's just so much diversity and uniqueness. I have friends and family who will go to Europe and they're like, it's so cool because everything's so unique and tailored to this place and these unique products and we have that here.

[01:02:54] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: we've glossed over the uniqueness of place. I think the more we incorporate [01:03:00] that, the more we are willing to learn and be stewards of the land and work with Indigenous folks. I think they have to be, they're the leaders and they're the people who have been on this land for time immemorial.

[01:03:09] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I want to be walking behind them and

their leadership, but it's just. It's so beautiful. Like I fell in love with this land when I started to see the history from looking at like the millennia of history, not like mm-hmm. I never related to growing up in a cowboy country. But to see the stories that come from the Blackfoot world of you, it's like this land has such a rich tapestry, so much to learn from and it's so deep.

[01:03:39] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I wanna have a better relationship with that. And then I see the world in two different eyes when I start to build those. Like realizing that there's this very, yeah deep, deep connection on this land is so beautiful.

[01:03:50] STEPH BENOIT: Mm-hmm. And it's so different like everywhere you go.

[01:03:53] STEPH BENOIT: When I was living in Vancouver and the first time I went to Camloops. I was like, are you kidding me? This place is like a desert. [01:04:00] It's like the American Southwest, but it's like here in BC and it's only four hours from Vancouver. And why did no one tell me that this existed?

[01:04:06] STEPH BENOIT: And it was like, yeah, just stopping and taking pictures of the roadside and just looking at all. And yeah, I think you hit the nail on the head there with that is Canada's. Heritage or this is something that we can be really proud of, is we've got coast to coast to coast.

[01:04:20] STEPH BENOIT: We've got everything from Tundra down to like desert essentially. And everything in between.

[01:04:26] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: I completely agree. And I think people feel more, I don't know, I think it's healthier for us to have these grounded experiences. I think, there's also research looking at, the mental health benefits of biodiversity connected to season, to land,

[01:04:41] LATIFA PELLETIER-AHMED: to something outside because we forget that we actually truly are interdependent on other species. you don't feel so alone. There's a real community and there's a real interconnectedness.

[01:04:52] *Final Thoughts and Personal Reflections*

[01:04:52] STEPH BENOIT: Before I go, excuse me. I have to tell you because I feel like you'll appreciate it.

[01:04:55] STEPH BENOIT: I was given this Great Lakes Tobacco that was [01:05:00] grown by, Anishinabe person. We were doing a community consultation and she brought these Great Lakes tobacco seeds to the consultation and she gave them to me. I was like, woo, this is a big gift. And then I grew them out and they grew so well, like truly.

[01:05:16] STEPH BENOIT: Every single seed germinated. I think I had like dozens and then I was trying to give them away because I was like inundated with tobacco and I was like, realistically I need two to three plants for myself. Everything else is superfluous. In the next week or so, I'll start them inside.

[01:05:32] STEPH BENOIT: And that is so exciting for me 'cause I had such a good time growing them and it felt like such a gift that someone would give you these tobacco seeds that have been grown in this land for ages. So yeah. Then [01:06:00] I was drying the tobacco in my. And one of my roommates was like, this plant is looking terrible. And I was like, oh no. I dried that on purpose like that. It's not, he was just like, what is this?

[01:06:13] STEPH BENOIT: This is yeah, like cursed basil. And I'm like, no, no, that's actually very sacred. So I would appreciate it if you didn't compost it.

[01:06:21] STEPH BENOIT: Anyway, we all have different relationships to plants. Definitely. Yeah. Okay. Oh my God. Okay, I'll let you go. Thank you so much and enjoy the rest of your evening.

[01:06:33] STEPH BENOIT: SeedHeads is produced by The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security, a program of SeedChange whose main office is located on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg people. To find episode transcripts and learn more about seed work in Canada, please visit seedsecurity.ca.

Music
