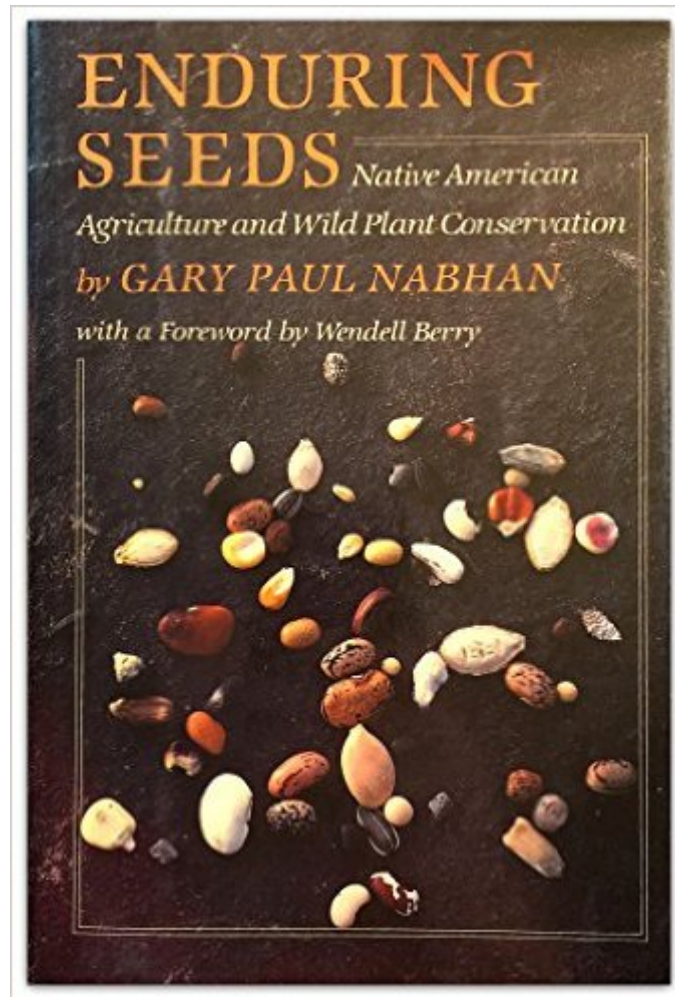


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Enduring Seeds: Native American Agriculture And Wild Plant Conservation



Synopsis

As biological diversity continues to shrink at an alarming rate, the loss of plant species poses a threat seemingly less visible than the loss of animals but in many ways more critical. In this book, one of America's leading ethnobotanists warns about our loss of natural vegetation and plant diversity while providing insights into traditional Native agricultural practices in the Americas. Gary Paul Nabhan here reveals the rich diversity of plants found in tropical forests and their contribution to modern crops, then tells how this diversity is being lost to agriculture and lumbering. He then relates "local parables" of Native American agriculture—from wild rice in the Great Lakes region to wild gourds in Florida—that convey the urgency of this situation and demonstrate the need for saving the seeds of endangered plants. Nabhan stresses the need for maintaining a wide gene pool, not only for the survival of these species but also for the preservation of genetic strains that can help scientists breed more resilient varieties of other plants. *Enduring Seeds* is a book that no one concerned with our environment can afford to ignore. It clearly shows us that, as agribusiness increasingly limits the food on our table, a richer harvest can be had by preserving ancient ways. This edition features a new foreword by Miguel Altieri, one of today's leading spokesmen for sustainable agriculture and the preservation of indigenous farming methods. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

Hardcover: 225 pages

Publisher: North Point Pr; 1st Edition edition (April 1989)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0865473439

ISBN-13: 978-0865473430

Product Dimensions: 8.9 x 6.2 x 1.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (9 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,156,563 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #228 in [Books > Science & Math > Agricultural Sciences > History](#) #1439 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Nature Writing & Essays](#) #2857 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Native American Studies](#)

Customer Reviews

Paul Nabhan's latest book is a delight to read. His clear writing style and effective way of illustrating

important points gives the reader a pleasant break from the more technical books on the topic of seed evolution and dispersion. But don't be deceived by its ease of reading, the book is full of facts about early native agricultural practices in North and Central America, contains warnings about our loss of natural vegetation, especially rain forests, and tells of our rapid loss of plant diversity. Dr. Nabhan is the cofounder of an organization called Native Seeds and is currently Assistant Director of the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix, Arizona. In these dual roles he has had ample opportunity to observe what is happening to our natural vegetation and to record how the diversity of plants in our world continues to shrink at an alarming rate. His book is divided into a series of chapters each with names intended to draw the reader's interest. Examples include: "Turning Foxholes into Compost Heaps," "Drowning in a Shallow Gene Pool," and "Invisible Erosion." Each of his 12 chapters focuses on an important point. The first one presents an interesting history of plant evolution from the earliest Paleozoic times through the late Cenozoic and explains how the large, plant gene pool created the wonderful diversity we have all come to enjoy. In the next several chapters Dr. Nabhan first addresses the great diversity of plants found in forests of the wet and dry tropics and next speaks about how this great diversity led to the emergence of many cultigens we now depend upon for our staples. He also points with alarm to how rapidly this diversity is being lost as large areas are converted to agricultural lands or are clear cut for their lumber.

I will disclose at the start that I have met Gary Paul Nabhan and that Miguel Altieri (who wrote one of the two forwards) was a graduate student at the same time I was a postdoctoral student at the University of Florida. Both of us were being directed in our work by the late Willard Whitcomb. I spent some time at Miguel's agricultural plots and was impressed by his work. I have read or skimmed a few of Nabhan's books and was equally impressed by his depth of knowledge of native plants. "Enduring Seeds" is certainly up to his high standards. We really don't hear much of native agriculture, apart from corn, and yet the Native American cropping system was much more complex, including not only maize (corn), but its companions beans and squash, as well as amaranth, sunflowers, cranberries, blueberries and pecans, and a number of crop plants now lost to us. As Nabhan points out the Hohokam had probably the most complex agriculture in North America with large irrigation systems and many crops, including some now not seen north of Mexico. The irrigation system they developed worked well for about 150 years and then drought and salting out, followed by floods, caused serious disruptions. Within a few hundred years they had abandoned their land. Snaketown, where Phoenix now stands, went from a thriving community of over 1000 to dry desert. Now Phoenix is copying Snaketown in an even bigger way as probably one of the least

sustainable cities in the United States. In "Enduring Seeds" Gary Paul Nabhan has delved deeply into the history to which we should pay more attention, instead of the emphasis on wars (although they certainly had their impacts). It is the history of the systems that sustain civilization that is at least as important as which general won which battle.

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