

International Ecology.

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Who Owns The Okra Seed?

MAYBE YOU DON'T care who owns the patents on the okra, carrot, cucumbers, tomatoes, celery and peppers you are eating. But somebody does, and gathering from what Congress has been hearing recently, they come from all around the world.

Patents on garden seed? Yes, indeed. There already are 222 other crops which are covered by seed patents in the United States. The six vegetables being considered for seed patent eligibility are only the latest in the list, delayed until now because the Campbell Soup Co. and the H. J. Heinz Co. used to worry that allowing patents on these seeds would increase the cost of their products.

This seed patenting has been going on since 1970 when Congress passed the Plant Variety Protection Act. Nobody got much excited about it then. So why now?

Because, for one thing, some food specialists say the act has caused some significant changes in the nation's agricultural research. Research spending by commercial seed companies has almost tripled in the last 10 years, it has been noted, while funding for plant breeding research by the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been declining. Public universities and the USDA experiment stations have received only 9 per cent of the new variety certificates issued through March, 1979.

That in itself is not necessarily bad. It seems to concern mainly persons who are looking desperately for trouble, like a United Nations official who has written a report expressing worry that the big seed companies might not be motivated to develop pest-resistant varieties because, he said, they are dominated by chemical companies which would lose sales. Balderdash. The idea hasn't developed any real following.

There also is concern that the seed business is being monopolized by conglomerate-owned giants. Those who have such worries note that Burpee Seeds has been acquired by IIT, Funk Seeds International by the Ciba-Geigy Corp., and Northrup-King by Sandoz, Inc. But, again, the fears seem overblown. The USDA says about 600 of the 800 applications for seed patents thus far have come from "smaller" companies, some of which, of course, then have been able to sell their rights to the major seed houses. The recently popular sugar

snap peas, for example, came from a small company in Idaho.

But such objections aside, there are others which appear well founded.

One of these is the fear that patenting may accelerate the trend toward genetic uniformity in plants. Scientists say genetic diversity already has been declining. This is worrisome because it means the production of world food supplies is becoming dependent upon a few crops, and the gene pool from which those varieties can be improved — or saved from extinction, perhaps — is shrinking. If the germ plasma needed to rescue a major food source — say corn or wheat — is unavailable, such a crop could be wiped out. There was some concern on this score just a few years ago when the Southern corn blight swept across the entire Corn Belt.

That concern about "narrowing the germ plasma base" has been expressed not only by the National Academy of Sciences but also by officials of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome and by the International Center for the Improvement of Corn and Wheat in Mexico City. E. J. Wellhausen of the international center in Mexico also points out that patented seeds are more expensive and thus place a heavier burden on developing nations seeking improved varieties.

GIVEN SUCH INFORMED concerns from scientists of international repute, shouldn't Congress look upon this legislation with more concern than the House Agriculture Committee did when it approved it 35-2?

There seem to be more real public and international concerns involved in this than the committee realized or was willing to acknowledge. The agriculture committee, of course, has its own concerns and its own interest to protect. But that should be taken into consideration when the matter comes before the full House.

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