

Fergus Byrne met Ellen Rignell near Bridport

*Ellen Rignell © Photograph by Robin Mills*

I grew up in Brighton, the youngest of three. My parents were both psychotherapists, and we lived in the centre of Brighton & Hove, so not very rural, but my mum loved the outdoors and would take us out into the Sussex countryside to identify wildflowers and explore the rolling hills of the South Downs. She was also an intuitive gardener, always involving us in the process. My earliest gardening memory is the smell of digging up Jersey Royals for Sunday lunch. My dad was an amazing cook and was the first to introduce me to the incredible satisfaction of eating delicious food that you have grown yourself.

I'm a Quaker, and that has been a big grounding influence in my life, especially in terms of community, social justice, and environmentalism. Growing up, I attended Quaker meetings and summer camps, full of talks, activities and inspiring people. Those experiences, rooted in the quiet stillness of Quaker practice, inspired me to want to do something valuable with my life. It was at one of those events that I met Sam who many years later would become my husband.

After leaving school I applied to study Politics and Philosophy at university. During my gap year, I worked and travelled, and by the end of that year I decided not to do politics. I've always been quite a practical person, and I found myself drawn

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to the idea of working with plants which felt satisfyingly more practical and tangible.

So I deferred for another year and moved to Ireland to work at a Camp Hill community outside Kildare in County Kildare. Camp Hill is an intentional community where you live and work alongside people with special needs. The community I joined had a big agricultural focus. I worked in the market garden and took a lot of pleasure from growing crops and seeing them thrive. You also spend a lot of time looking after people and I gained a lot of confidence from that. It was a structured lifestyle, with set work hours and tasks, but I loved it.

After my year in Ireland, I went to study Plant Sciences at Sheffield, where Sam was also studying. As the course became more specific to plants and plant communities, I found my element. I really enjoyed working on my own projects and learning about plant genetics and ecology.

One of the most inspiring things during the course was a module on sustainable agriculture by Jonathan Leake, a soil scientist. He stressed the importance of university-educated, environmentally passionate people entering agriculture, but told us that none of us would likely do it because it was so badly paid. His words stuck with me, and he became a kind of mentor, overseeing my final projects.

After university, I got a job with the National Institute of Agricultural Botany (NIAB) in East Anglia, working in the plant pathology department on Defra trials, assessing plant diseases and testing crop resistance. My job involved growing diseases, bulk-producing them, and spraying them on crops to test resistance. While I enjoyed the outdoor work, I eventually got fed up with just killing plants. I needed a change, and when my husband decided to enrol in a boat-building course in Lyme Regis, we moved to West Dorset.

That was a big, big jump. I retrained in practical horticulture at Bicton College, joined the Women's Retraining as Gardeners (WRAG) scheme, and was offered a placement at Abbotsbury Gardens. After I finished the course, I got a part-time job at Abbotsbury Gardens and volunteered in the market garden at Trill Farm near Axminster, eventually doing an apprenticeship there.

Trill Farm was an incredible place to work. It was great fun. The wider farm was owned by Romey Fraser at the time and there was a lot going on. Chris Onions would cook delicious seasonal food for lunch every day and there was a constant flow of volunteers. We lived in a caravan in the garden, which was challenging in winter but wonderful in summer. It was at Trill that I started on the seed saving journey that led to me setting up Winnow Farm Seeds. There's something really tactile and magical about working with seeds—seeing a plant complete its life cycle and being part of that process.

In 2017, I got a job with the Seed Sovereignty Program run by the Gaia Foundation, which aims to build a thriving seed-saving community in the UK. Seed saving is crucial

for preserving genetic diversity. What is amazing about plants is how incredibly generous they are. You start with this tiny seed, it becomes this massive thing, and then it gives you so many seeds. But the genetic diversity is really important because that is almost like the plant's toolkit to cope with whatever life throws at it. And in the context of climate chaos, this is really, really important. The UK is, sadly, uniquely disconnected from agriculture and the natural world, with very few people saving seeds compared to other countries like France, Italy or the US.

I focused on open-pollinated seeds, which can be saved and replanted to produce similar plants, unlike F1 hybrid seeds that result in unpredictable offspring. Open-pollinated seeds are open-source, allowing gardeners to grow and save their own seeds. I organized courses on professional seed saving, built networks among agroecological and organic growers, and attended really inspiring events, including the Organic Seed Alliance Conference in Oregon in 2020.

The conference was a turning point for me. I learned an incredible amount about seed saving and loved the culture of collaboration. It was just before COVID hit and before I had my first child. After having my second child and now living in Bridport, I decided to start Winnow Farm Seeds. I wanted to focus on growing high-quality seeds and foster in others the sense of abundance that I had experienced by growing from seed.

I partnered with two other growers, Emma Dixon and Lucy Saville, to find a shared growing space. We chose a site at Newhouse Farm in Broadoak in the Marshwood Vale with a fantastic supportive community and ethos. The heavy clay soil is actually an advantage for seed saving, as it helps grow stronger seeds. As a seed saver, to grow the most resilient seed for my customers, I want to put the plants through their paces. So I follow a strict philosophy of treating the plants 'mean' to encourage them to develop strong roots and resilience. We spend a lot of time on the soil, trying to encourage all these lovely fungi and bacteria that have symbiotic relationships with plant roots. Priming those plants and priming those seeds to grow better.

Now Winnow Farm has its own seed catalogue which includes productive crops like cut flowers, edible flowers, herbs, and vegetables. I have a weak spot for unusual varieties and aim to diversify what's available to UK gardeners. Brexit has made importing seeds more difficult and expensive, so offering a wider range of options is more important than ever. It's also important to diversify sources of seeds because half of the global seed market is controlled by just four companies.

That's all big picture stuff, but I am also motivated by the connections to people that come with running a seed company. I enjoy writing a blog and sharing what I am up to day to day and often get emails from customers. Some even send pictures of the plants they have grown. I love this sense of community - and it keeps growing. 