



Notes from River Farm

Seed Exchange

by David J. Ellis

FOR MOST OF the year, the seed room at River Farm is a quiet place. But each January and February, it becomes a beehive of activity as the horticultural staff, interns, and volunteers fill seed orders to send out to members as part of the Society's annual Free Seed Exchange.

"We use an assembly-line process to fill seed orders," says AHS Garden Manager Barry Stahl, "and sometimes, when the orders are really flying through the process, I am reminded of the scene from an old *I Love Lucy* episode where Lucy and Ethel are boxing chocolates and the conveyor belt is running so fast they have to start eating the chocolates to stay ahead."

POPULAR BENEFIT

The seed exchange has been a favorite with AHS members since it was first introduced as a member benefit in the spring of 1959. The first offering consisted of only six types of seeds of ornamental trees and shrubs that were made available by the Society's secretary. The members responded with such enthusiasm, however, that more seeds were made available that fall.

At first, most contributors to the seed exchange were members who were willing to share the fruits of their garden. But as the number of people who participated in the seed exchanges steadily climbed, donations were solicited from seed companies and botanical gardens, which responded generously.

In 1973, when the Society's headquarters was established at River Farm, a whole new source of seeds opened up. Since that time, seed exchange offerings have regularly included seeds harvested from plants growing on our grounds. In this year's exchange (AHS members received a special

insert with this issue of the magazine that included the seed list and order form), meadow rue (*Thalictrum rochebrunianum*) and Franklin tree (*Franklinia alatamaha*) are among the seeds that were collected at River Farm.

The number of seeds offered each year has increased gradually through the years and now averages around 130. Sometimes the amount of seeds sent in by individual donors is too small to offer in the ex-

to defray shipping expenses. Interns play a key role in coordinating the seed exchange, but in the fall, when seed donations start arriving—and again in early winter, when mail bins full of seed orders begin to pile up—the entire horticulture department staff and many volunteers pitch in to keep the program running smoothly.

To encourage more people to donate seeds, one significant change was made to the program this year: Members who donated seeds for this year's exchange will get their orders filled first up until a cut-off date, at which point other seed requests will be filled in the order in which they were received.

GIVE IT A TRY

Exchanging seeds with other gardeners is a time-honored way to share the bounty of your garden and extend the frontiers of your gardening experience—all at minimal to

no cost. No matter what your age, there's still a childlike delight to be found in successfully growing plants from seed and watching them mature. And it's a painless chance to experiment with plants you might otherwise not think of growing.

If you haven't participated in the seed exchange before, I urge you to try it out this spring. Then remember to save some seeds to donate to the 2003 seed exchange in the fall.

David J. Ellis is editor of The American Gardener.



By early January, jars of seeds donated by AHS members line seed room shelves.

change, but those seeds don't go to waste; they are either grown out and planted at River Farm or donated to school and correctional facility horticulture programs.

NEW TO THE PROGRAM

The seed exchange has always been a free service to members, but in recent years, donations generated by the program have been used to support the Society's National Horticultural Internship Program and