



Scotland's Year of Heritage, History and Archaeology 2017

Crofting Connections Heritage Seeds and Seed Potatoes

*You have 3 packs of **precious heritage seeds** this year, which, with the heritage potatoes we sent, reflect the traditional croft diet: **cereals** (bere), **roots** (swede or turnip) and **brassicas** (kale or Shetland cabbage). **These seeds are very precious and cannot be found commercially.** This is why we have sent you such a small number of each. They are saved for future generations and you can be part of that by sowing, nurturing and keeping seed from one or two plants as part of a "living gene bank".*

In your pack, you will have:

- **Orkney bere seed** donated by the Agronomy Institute, UHI, Orkney - 80-120 seeds.
- either **Shetland Cabbage or Kale: Pentland Brig** donated by SASA - 7-15 seeds
- either **Swede: Balmoral or Turnip: Aberdeen Green Top Yellow** donated by SASA - 12-20 seeds

This plant heritage goes back thousands of years, reflecting the heritage, history and archaeology of growing crops. You can learn more about the ancient roots of our crofting communities in archaeological sites such as Skara Brae in Orkney: <http://www.orkneyjar.com/history/skarabrae/> or the heritage site in Ardnamurchan: <http://heritageardnamurchan.co.uk/ormsaigmore/>

See also <http://kilchoan.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/runrig-system.html>

Lazybeds and runrigs, kailyards and planticrubs

Growing traditional crops on the croft

You can study the way crops have been grown in the townships and crofts of the Highlands and Islands. The **original Highland township** was a system of collective tenancy where the land for growing crops was divided into 'runrigs' and shared out annually by casting 'lots'. The less productive land, on hill or moorland, was used for livestock. The last of these Highland townships survived till the mid-20th century and is now a museum: <http://www.auchindrain.org.uk/about-auchindrain/>. See also the runrig system in the Western Isles: <http://www.hebrideanconnections.com/stories-reports-and-traditions/16868>



In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tenancies were allocated to individual crofters in most areas of the Highlands and Islands faced the challenge of growing food for the family from very poor soils, in wet and windy conditions. It is a tribute to their ingenuity that they succeeded in feeding large extended families in such conditions. You can learn more about crofting at <http://www.crofting.org>



Lazybeds are suited to cold, wet areas with shallow, poorly-drained soil. The raised beds are drier and therefore warmer than the moist flat ground around them. The beds warm up more quickly in the morning and retain heat longer. At night, they protect crops from frost by draining the denser cold air into the ditches. They are still to be found in parts of the Hebrides where they are known as **feannagan** in Gaelic. *Crofters used sand, seaweed and manure from livestock housed over the winter to increase fertility and improve the texture of the soil.*

The croft **kailyard** was the source of vegetables for the family. As well as kail, cabbages, roots, onions and tatties, crofters in most areas could

grow rhubarb and gooseberries. The walls of the kailyard kept out the livestock and provided protection against the wind.

The traditional *planticrub* or *crö* can be found all over Shetland. It is a small walled enclosure, originally designed as a nursery area for Shetland kail seedlings. Over the winter, it protected the young plants from the wind and driving rain or snow, as well as from roaming livestock, before the plants were transferred in to kailyards or the open field in spring. See - <https://www.shetlanddialect.org.uk/john-j-grahams-shetland-dictionary.php?word=1825>



Bere: the oldest cultivated cereal

“Tìr a’mhurain, tìr an eòrna, tìr’s am pailt a h’uile Seòrsa”
“Land of bent grass, land of barley, land of plenty”

Bere and black oats were the main cereal crops grown in some parts of the Highlands and Islands up to the start of the 20th Century and both could produce crops on land where new varieties failed or did not perform well.

“**Bere** has been grown in Orkney for thousands of years, both for human and animal food. In the old days, it was called *Bygg*, and this is still the name given to barley in Norway. Although we call the meal beremeal, the crop is usually called *corn* in Orkney. It has been the staff of life in Orkney - in the form of bere bannocks and home brewed ale - since time immemorial. It is an ancient landrace variety of barley, although it differs in both appearance and taste from modern barley.” <http://www.birsay.org.uk/baronymill.htm>

The **Orkney bere seed** has been generously donated, once again, by the Agronomy Institute in Orkney. <https://www.orkney.uhi.ac.uk/research-enterprise>

Potatoes: A much-loved staple food for crofters since the nineteenth century

The potato is the most important food crop in the world after cereals because it is high yielding, easy to harvest and to store and very nutritious. Potatoes were first cultivated circa 8,000 years ago, by the Incas of South America, around La Paz and Lake Titicaca in the mountains of Peru. They can be grown at altitudes too high for most other crops, up to 4,200metres above sea level, which is roughly three times the height of Ben Nevis.

http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/06/0610_020610_potato.html

Thanks to the Andean tradition of exchanging potato seeds and tubers at social gatherings, the great range of potato varieties has long been maintained. The International Potato Centre in Peru has 3,800 varieties of Andean cultivated potatoes

Potatoes were first brought to Europe in the 1560s. By the 19th century, potatoes were a very important part of the crofters’ diet. In 1845-49 there was a great famine caused by potato blight. Most potatoes grown in Scotland and Ireland were a variety called Lumpers (named because they were ‘lumpy’). They were chosen because they were very high yielding. Sadly, this variety had no resistance to potato blight.

Find out about the potato famine in Scotland and Ireland in the 1840s and 1850s. The famine was caused by blight which killed all the potato plants and many people did not have enough to eat.

Ever since then people have been breeding new varieties of potato which are less badly affected by blight. However, blight keeps changing and so new breeds of potato are always needed. Keeping heritage strains going helps to maintain a large gene-pool for new varieties.



PINK FIR APPLE is a very old variety dating back to the 1850s. It is pink-skinned, long and knobbly, with a waxy yellow flesh. Can be harvested in the autumn and is great for salads.

BRITISH QUEEN is a Scottish heritage variety, bred by Archibald Findlay in 1894. It has always been a favourite in Scotland and Ireland. It is a second early potato, with white skin and white flesh. The flesh is dry and floury, with great flavour, which makes excellent mashed potato.

KERRS PINK is a heritage variety which is a favourite of crofters. It was bred in Scotland in 1907 and was taken to Ireland in 1917, where it is also popular. It is pink-skinned and floury, as are many potatoes favoured in Scotland. It makes good mashed and roast potatoes

ARRAN VICTORY is a tall, late main-crop variety first marketed in 1918 and bred by Donald McKelvie. Named on the Isle of Arran after the First World War, this round to oval tuber has consistently been popular with growers due to high yields and long seasons. Distinct blue/purple skin covers white floury flesh. Although it will mash well, it does fall apart when boiling.

Seed potatoes were supplied by **Skea Organics** <https://food.list.co.uk/place/45416-skea-organics/> and **William Shearer** of Orkney - <https://en-gb.facebook.com/williamshearerkirkwall/>

Cabbages and kale, swedes and turnips - staples of the traditional croft diet

Brassicas and root crops provide nourishing winter vegetables for the croft family and good fodder for animals. They are easy to store and grow well on the lazy beds and kailyards of the crofts, surviving even harsh winters to provide crops for people and livestock in the very early spring.



Shetland Cabbage / Shetland Kale - also spelt *kail* - (*Brassica oleracea* L) is the oldest known Scottish local vegetable variety and has been grown on the Shetland Islands since at least the 17th century.

Used as a vegetable, the outer or dropped leaves are also used as winter feed for cattle and sheep. Much variation can be found in the kail and the heart is a lot more open than modern cabbage varieties.

<https://www.sasa.gov.uk/book/export/html/1703>

http://www.biodiversityinternational.org/fileadmin/PGR/article-issue_154-art_1-lang_en.html



Pentland Brig Kale is a 20th century heritage variety which produces leaves in the autumn, less curled than most kales. It will also produce tender young leaf shoots and spears (like broccoli) in the early spring.

Kale will tolerate poor soil and is not as troubled by problems faced by other members of the cabbage family, such as pigeons, club root and cabbage root fly. It is a hardy crop which will survive even harsh winters.

The swede and turnip seeds are featured in the 1932 catalogue from Barclay, Ross and Hutchison, Aberdeen, Farm Implements and Seeds - for extracts from the catalogue sent by SASA see additional document attached or visit <http://croftingconnections.com/schools/resources>

Swede: Balmoral - also known as '**neeps**' in Scotland, swede is a root vegetable similar to the turnip, which originated as a cross between a cabbage and a turnip. It is less watery in texture than a turnip. It is also called **rutabaga**, from an old Swedish dialect word. The word **swede** comes from **Swedish turnip**, and confusingly it is also sometimes called a turnip. It has sweet-tasting yellow or white flesh and can be cooked in much the same way as other root vegetables or eaten raw in salads. *It is famous the world over as an important part of the traditional Burns Supper of haggis, neeps and tatties, celebrated on January 25th.*

The roots and tops are also used as winter feed for livestock, when they may be fed directly, or by allowing the animals to forage the plants in the field.



Halloween lanterns were made from swedes and turnips before the current fashion arrived from America, for pumpkin lanterns, which are easier to carve.

Turnip: Aberdeen Green Top Yellow

“From the late 17th century landowners and farmers in Scotland started to improve their land. Small-holdings were amalgamated into larger single-tenant farms with longer leases, which provided tenants with sufficient time to invest in new methods of farming and crops. Many new leases actually specified that land improvements such as tree planting, enclosure

and crop rotation were employed.

Crop rotation was introduced from England and resulted in yields doubling and even trebling. Turnips had been used in Scotland for domestic consumption for some time, but they were now introduced as a field crop to provide winter feed for livestock.” See <http://www.scottisharchivesforschools.org/naturalScotland/EnormousTurnips.asp>

All the brassica and root seeds have been generously donated by the seed bank at SASA - see <https://www.sasa.gov.uk/> . As the quantities are very small, you will receive *either Shetland Cabbage or Pentland Brig Kale*; and *either Balmoral Swede or Aberdeen Green Top Yellow Turnip*.

Sowing and nurturing these precious heritage seeds:



Seed counting:



Bere:

At the Official Seed Testing Station, it is practice to count seeds in 5s.) Make groups of 5 seeds. This makes it quick and easy to count 100 seeds (4 groups of 5x5 seeds). 100 seeds will need 1 square meter of prepared soil.

Brassica and root seeds from SASA:

These are tiny, very precious, seeds - you can count how many seeds you have before removing from the little plastic envelope, and count again when you open it, so you don't lose any.



Sowing, plant emergence and planting out: All seeds can be sown at the end of April or beginning of May.

Bere:

Prepare the seed bed and sow each seed 5 cm apart in rows 20 cm apart. Try and keep weed-free and protect from birds over the summer. Do not plant more than 0.5 cm deep. After sowing, the crofter will go into the field to check how the seeds have come up. Pupils can count the number of emerged plants. Bear in mind that seeds may take 10 - 14 days to emerge, depending on temperature. How does the number of emerged plants compare with the number of seeds sown?

Shetland Cabbage or Kale: Pentland Brig

Sowing: plant each seed in small pot or seed module tray filled with compost. Keep in a sheltered place till the plant is ready for moving to its permanent place in the garden.

Planting out: When the plants have 2/3 pairs of leaves, transplant in a clean bed 60 cm apart, planting so the lowest leaves are just above the soil. You can use woven black plastic as illustrated below, which will help to keep the plants free of weeds, especially during the summer, though we recommend that you appoint volunteers to look after your plants in the summer holidays.



Swede: Balmoral or Turnip: Aberdeen Green Top Yellow

Sowing: plant each seed in small pot or seed module tray filled with compost. Keep in a sheltered place till plant has 2/3 pairs of leaves. **Planting out:** When the plants have 2/3 pairs of leaves, transplant in a clean bed 15 cm apart, planting so the lowest leaves are just above the soil. You can use woven black plastic as illustrated for brassica plants, which will help to keep

the plants free of weeds, especially during the summer, though *we recommend that you appoint volunteers to look after your plants in the summer holidays.*

Happy crofting!

We will send you more information on harvesting, storage and seed-saving after the summer holidays.