

## **Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us**

### **Episode # 48: Meet Owen Taylor, Founder of Truelove Seeds**

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Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series "The Holistic Nature of Us".

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I feature authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. We'll see what's trending, what's relevant to our world today, not just for land use, but to connect the dots between nature and ourselves. It's time for practical action and profound inner change so our natural world is valued once again.

Today I'm delighted to introduce you to Owen Taylor. Owen recently launched Truelove Seeds, a seed company that offers rare, open pollinated and culturally important vegetable, herb and flower seeds grown by urban and rural farmers committed to community food sovereignty, cultural preservation and sustainable agriculture. He coordinates and mentors The Truelove farmers and also grows open pollinated seeds, herbs and flowers at Mill Hollow Farm in Edgemont Pennsylvania west of his home in Southwest Philadelphia. Owen also spent a decade working with food justice organization in San Francisco, New York City and Philadelphia, and later managed William Woys Weaver's historic Roughwood seed collection in Devon Pennsylvania for four years.

So good morning Owen, I'm so happy that you're here with us today at Holistic Nature of Us.

OWEN: Good morning. Thanks so much for having me.

JUDITH: We have a lot to talk about this morning and I'm really excited to hear more about seeds. In January people are looking at their seed

catalogues. You have a great company that you founded recently. So, tell us how you got started and tell us about your company.

OWEN: Okay, great. Well I just launched seed sales a little over a year ago, December 2017, and I started this company to combine my passion for seeds and their stories with my work in community with food sovereignty and food justice groups. As you mentioned in the introduction, I worked for four years with William Woys Weaver who has an 85-year-old seed collection that he had found in his grandfather's basement after he died. I was helping him to maintain over 4,000 varieties of heirloom seeds and I kind of just fell into it. I needed some extra work while I was doing some community organizing. I was introduced to Will and I instantly fell in love with seeds and their stories working with his collections. And so for four years I learned the art of keeping seeds, getting to know the plant from seed to seed and you know while I was there I started dreaming how can I bring this new knowledge and practice back to the communities that I' be working with in various cities and rural farms, people who were trying to feed their communities and solve the inadequacies and injustices of the food system.

JUDITH: And there's a lot of them, isn't there when we look at our urban areas, what's limited food-wise in those areas?

OWEN: It's true, it's true. As you know it's especially easy to see in the urban places where I've been living and working but it's also happening in rural places, and food is something that we leave to the market forces. There are a lot of things that are important like housing, like energy that are somewhat controlled by the government, making sure that people have housing and people have water and electricity. People are not able to access food. You know, I studied urban planning, believe it or not, and in urban planning we look at transportation and housing and water, but we did not look at food. And so, food is something that is totally left up to the kind of global food system and so many communities are left out as a result.

JUDITH: That's true. And we know that our seeds are contaminated in this process for the sake of enough food for the whole world and that's kind of a myth, isn't it? If we all looked at our neighborhoods and grew good quality food whoever is called to do so, we could provide better food, healthier food for our community, one farm, one backyard, one front yard at a time.

OWEN: Right. I mean one of the casualties to this idea of modernization and globalization is that people think someone else can do their farming for them. And part of that is, you know, also saying that someone else can save their seeds for them. There's this big movement now for people to get back to the land, get reconnected with their food. You hear: know your farmer. There's a big push to go to the farmer's markets or even start your own farm and I think a logical extension to that is thinking about where our seeds come from? There's so many reasons to get into that line of thought. Besides just the idea of personal and community sovereignty being in control of where your seeds and where your food comes from there's a lot to be said for saving your own seeds in terms of making sure that they're adapted to your place and that they're adapted to your taste. And so that's a big reason why I'm excited to work with farmers both in the cities and rural places to start to explore what it means to save your own seed and all the benefits that that can bring to you and your community.

JUDITH: So give us an example Owen, of one of the farms that you help with and perhaps their success story.

OWEN: Sure. Well I guess I'll start with my partner who a farmer in our neighborhood in Southwest Philadelphia at Sankofa Farm at Bartram's Garden is also. They are already focused on growing crops of the African Diaspora since they're primarily working with African and African American communities and so for them, they were already thinking about how do we preserve our culture through farming? And my partner is from the Mississippi Delta and grew up sitting on the porch with his grandmother Shelly's speckled brown butter beans. I asked him, just like I asked all of the farmers that I work with, what seed tells your story? That was where his mind went, grandma, porch, butter beans. So, we started to track down where are these seeds, because they're not really available outside of the delta. And so, through friends and family he found some folks who were still keeping these butter beans which are all throughout the delta. When we go down there for holidays that's what people are eating. We found a source for the seeds and he started growing them on his farm. They're absolutely delicious and now he's growing grandma's beans again and we shell them on our porch with the neighborhood kids. So that's an example of the stories. He doesn't have to get them shipped all the time from Mississippi, shrink wrapped or frozen. He can now grow them on his farm and share them with his community.

JUDITH: And he's saving the seed and teaching his community how to do that, correct?

OWEN: Exactly, exactly. That's a big portion of it. He works with dozens of youth from the neighborhood, high schools who are employed to work at the farm and a big part of their work is education. And so they definitely learn about seed keeping, seed saving throughout their time there, over and over.

JUDITH: Do you find that the children are getting more enthusiastic about it? It seems like we've gotten away from nature with our children. There's a lot of research on that fact, that we're kind of two generations removed from working the land. Are you finding that there's more of an interest from the community, that it's slowly growing, and the enthusiasm is building?

OWEN: Yeah, I think that you know it really depends on how they're introduced to it and I think having very dynamic enthusiastic mentors and adults that are very connected to the work in a personal way can really help, you know? And the fact that they really house this learning about seed saving and farming in ancestral crops and in crops that tell the deeper story of the community makes it more relevant, makes it more personal. The fact that Sankofa Farm is founded on kind of the notion of connecting to your ancestry in order to move towards this collective future really gives it a lot more meaning to the students.

JUDITH: Do they do anything with food, in terms of food preparation with these seeds that they're harvesting? Is that component a part of it?

OWEN: They certainly do. That was just one example. At that farm they have cooking demonstrations. They cook meals together but many of the farms that I work with have similar youth programs and do similar things. They have, a lot of times, elders from the community who are community chefs that come in and work with the youth. A lot of them are training the youth to give cooking demonstrations for others. You know most of the farms that I work with do not have youth programs but many of them do and they seem to be integrating intergenerational learning, cooking, growing, history, and so on.

JUDITH: I think that's an amazing project process that you're sharing because we are multicultural. I don't want to see a homogenized world. I love the differences in culture. I love the differences in cuisine, in taste, in

art work, in cultural gatherings and it feels to me that what you're doing is a great way to preserve the culture within our diversity, is what I'm getting at. So it's not lost.

OWEN: Totally. I mean that's kind of getting to the core of what I am hoping to do with Truelove seeds. You know from my own family, most of whom immigrated from Ireland or Italy and some other parts of Europe, we lost connection to our culture, which in most places is land-based culture generations ago in this effort to become "American". And so, my family has really not held onto that as a way to move up the class ladder. My work on my farm is to relearn and reconnect with the food cultures and therefore the broader cultures of the places where my ancestors came from before they landed in New York and Connecticut. I'm doing the same with all of the growers that I work with. Many of the growers have not lost that thread of connection to their culture. I worked with some refugee communities, various immigrant communities, communities that are still holding on to their culture as a survival mechanism and as a way to stay connected to what makes them, them. And so, the cultural piece is very important to me. Like I said, seeds tell a story and so by staying connected to the seeds that our grandparents and their parents and their grandparents have always been connected to, keep that line connected back in time and provide us this rich connection to culture, even if our parents or grandparents may have dropped it along the way. It's been very meaningful for me and many of the growers who I work with that also have assimilated through the generations to reconnect.

JUDITH: Well it sounds like you work with many farms, many different types of farms. That has to be very fulfilling for you to see your dream manifest, you know? That's it's actually happening!

Could you tell us more about Truelove seeds and your vision and goals? You've been in business for a year now and how is it growing?

OWEN: Sure. It's going pretty well. I'm getting more attention and more customers than I expected. Of course, it's still the first year of the business so it's not quite, totally on its feet yet but I have a lot of hope. You know I started the farm here, and I'm sitting at my farm now, at Mill Hollow Farm. A couple of years ago, in preparation for the first year of seed sales, and this last year was a very difficult year for farmers in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. It was very wet and hot, but we were lucky to get a good amount

of seed harvest anyway and I'm really excited about the new varieties that we'll be listing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year and the same varieties we had last year. What seems to be happening is a lot of the varieties we offer are fairly rare on this continent and some of the most popular varieties are, I'm imagining people are finding them through Google search, people who have moved here to this country looking for a taste of home. And so, for example we have a variety called Huacatay, which is a Peruvian marigold that's used for its leaves. It's made into a paste and eaten in many of the most popular dishes of Peru. We also have Callaloo which is in the Caribbean, is often an amaranth. Callaloo is a broader category of greens that includes many species but in parts of the Caribbean it's usually this green amaranth that they eat the leaves of. And those are two of the most popular products because they're hard to find the seeds and people find them essential to their cuisine.

JUDITH: So, seed saving isn't just one aspect of farming. You have to have the plants. You have to know when to harvest those seeds. Could you give us a little bit of information on seed saving, or seed harvesting?

OWEN: Sure. Well I like how you introduced the program. I can't remember exactly what you said but around nature being in us and us being connected to nature and I think that's the first place to start. Beyond the technical information that I could give you I think the first place to start is really getting to know your plants. When we're eating a head of lettuce, we're eating a very young plant. We haven't seen it go to maturity. We haven't seen it in all of its stages. A lot of people get worried when their lettuce starts to bolt and grows very tall and then maybe flowers come. And we're like okay, this is too late for us to enjoy this plant but that's when the plant is just getting started. And so, getting to really know your plants, observe them and start to look for where is the seed. You know a big part of the work of seed saving is just getting to know plants and their sexual maturity. Looking for the flower is looking for when they start to die back. Looking for the seeds to develop. Identifying a seed is the first step. For some things like beans it's very obvious where the seed is. The seed is what we eat. But a lot of other plants we don't usually...we can't even imagine what the seed looks like. And so, I think the **first step is identifying where the seed happens and what it looks like**. And then into more technical stuff, there's really, there's wet seeds and there's dry seeds, to over simplify it. And things like tomatoes, peppers, squash, cucumbers, those are wet seeded species where you're going to be harvesting the seed from a fruit that

is mature; that is wet. There are dry seeded crops like beans and peas which are the obvious ones but also lettuce and other members of the aster family and mint family like basil and many grains. With dry seeded crops you really want them to dry on the plant before you harvest. You don't want to pick a green bean and expect to get a mature seed. With wet seeded crops you want to know when the fruit is fully mature. So, a tomato when you eat it IS the right time to save the seeds. But a cucumber when you eat it is immature. So, getting to know when to pick the cucumber, which will mean it will get very large and yellow or orange and gross looking, harvest to our perspective. That's when the seeds will be plump and mature. So that's a very broad stroke of how to do seed saving and I can get into some more details if you want.

JUDITH: Well I think those are great tips because again, we're in January. January, February, March is when gardeners start looking at their seeds. I'm a member of the Bionutrient Food Association and they really promote inoculation of seeds. I think that's a relatively new concept out there, because I'm also a Master Gardener member and I don't recall being taught that, through that very good program. But I think the BFA takes it a step further and says, wait a minute. We need really good quality seed to have good quality nutrition. And another member of the BFA said that our food nutrients are about 40-50% of its potential. So, we're not getting 60% of the nourishment from our food system.

OWEN: Right. Well I was...I'm grateful that I got to speak at the BFA, the Hartford area chapter last year. But it's true. I did grow up knowing to inoculate peas because of the relationship between the bacterias and the roots but I only recently learned about how it's important to inoculate all different seed crops. And there are so many other quality considerations in seed saving. You know you want to grow fairly large populations of many of these crops instead of saving corn seed from one single plant, you want to think about having 50 or 100 or 200 plants to really have strong genetic diversity. And genetic diversity is really important in seed saving because our climate is changing. Our world is changing. People are moving from place to place and the more genetic diversity you have in your seed crop the better it is able to adapt to your place, to a new climate. And so, it's similar to humans, if you want to bring it to that point. We want to really have a greater diversity in our gene pool to be able to survive whatever comes. And so harvesting seeds from larger populations is important. Harvesting seeds from very healthy plants is really important. Looking for the qualities that

are important to us like taste, like color, like vigor, productivity and so on really helps. As a seed saver you become a plant breeder. Even if you are saving heirloom crops that are 200 years old, you're still a plant breeder in that you're selecting the qualities that are important to you like health, like taste, like vigor. So that brings us a higher quality food as well.

JUDITH: But also, from a holistic point of view, my message and hopefully my inspiration for others is to remember that what we do affects the next seven generations. When we start these practices, we're not only providing for ourselves but we're also taking care of the land because you can't have good quality food in these plants and strong healthy vigorous seed if we don't start with the soil, you know? And so that, every choice we make along the way is going to have future consequences. I think today what we're seeing are all the choices we made 50 years ago, 70 years ago as having serious consequences from lack of health, chronic diseases are skyrocketing. In our grocery stores we have aisles of food that are dead. I mean they're just empty calories. There's no nutrition to them. So, I think your message and what you're doing is very timely. The listeners can contact you through your website. You're in your first year. You have several varieties available and you're adding more today. What kind of tips would you give the gardeners besides these for practical use for today, for looking in seed catalogues for example?

OWEN: I would say, well this is very particular to my mission, but I would say **what are the crops that you feel very connected to?** It's been so meaningful for me, like I said earlier and for very many other people that I work with to think what crops are very meaningful to me? For example, growing my Irish and Italian crops, my stewardship of these varieties becomes so much deeper in that they are part of my story. And I think if we're thinking forward to seven generations, we want to be growing crops that mean something to us and that we want to take care of, like we would take care of family. Many people consider our plants that we care for are our relatives. You know I've learned many things from my friend Rowan White who's a Mohawk beekeeper in Northern California and one of them is this concept of plant relatives. That we have evolved alongside of these plants. And so, I think taking them into our constellation and under our wing as if they are family members really helps us to not lose them again, like we've been doing for the last 50 or 70 years as we've been outsourcing agriculture to other people and trying to modernize. If we're trying to take back the land and take back our relationship to the soil and the crops, I think

having a meaningful connection to them is important. So, think about what plants did my people take care of and try to bring them back into your constellation and to your stewardship.

JUDITH: I think that's a really good point because some of us only have small spaces to grow something and square foot gardening is very popular and it's fun to do. Some of the Master Gardener associations that I was a part of in Virginia did a lot of demo gardens and one of them was the square foot. And it really helps people who live on very small parcels of land or have only a deck and they're putting in a few pots. But why not save seeds from your own plant that you put on the deck? Why not take it one step further? I think that you've struck a cord for myself to go back to my garden and say, okay I've got this amount of space why do I need to have 20 plants, you know? To narrow it down a little bit better.

OWEN: Yeah and I would say along those lines maybe pick one thing this year, if you've never saved seeds before, **pick on thing to try saving seeds from.** You know my mother in Northeastern Connecticut grows a square foot garden and she has experimented with a certain tomato, for example, or a certain pepper, and just dipping her toe into seed saving and that's where it all starts and that's where the passion can kind of blossom. But not trying to start a whole seed saving garden and save seeds from everything but do baby steps and you learn as you go. And you may find the next year that you had some accidental cross pollination or maybe there's some other problem but that's just where you learn and that's how you get started. A lot of times, when I first started teaching about seed saving, I was worried I scared people away by talking about isolation distance and minimum population size and this and that, which are all important considerations for seed producers but for the backyard gardener just do it. You know I find that even walking through the woods I saw seeds from wild plants. It becomes a fun activity. It becomes a way of becoming connected to these plants. I think just trying with one thing next year or two things is a good place to start.

JUDITH: Very good. I love your wisdom on that. You know I'm an herbalist and I remember one gal got terribly overwhelmed learning about herbs and she had a dream. And in the dream, she saw this big giant cup and the message was start with one plant and get to know it really well. And I think that's a good message because if you know one plant and I know one plant and my neighbor knows one plant if something happens in our neighborhood we can share. We can help each other out and that's a holistic

concept because it's regenerative and it's sustainable. Living in isolation, even plants don't do well in isolation when they're cut off from the forest, when a forest is chopped down. So, I think these are all very wise things that you're sharing for us.

Do you have another tip?

OWEN: I'm just riffing off of what you just said. I think that's a great direction to go in. I mean even myself starting this seed company, one of the reasons I work with so many growers is because I can't do it all at my farm. I mean the other reason is that I love working with people and mentorship and collaboration but logistically speaking you probably can't save the seeds from all of the things that you like to grow in your one space. And so, collaborating with others, saying I'll do the tomatoes this year, you do the lettuce, is a great way to build community and also logistically just get the seeds that you need from small spaces. I think that's a great idea. So maybe looking for seed swaps. It's one thing to buy from companies like mine which I of course would love for people to do, but I also run seed swaps in the Philadelphia area because I recognized that's a way to promote seed saving in your community. A lot of times people will bring the one seed that they saved in their garden and then announce it to the group and then swap it with someone else who saved one seed. And that's a great forum and a great place to build that community and swap the seeds that you've been saving.

JUDITH: Yeah, I know there's a small movement. I don't know how much momentum it's gaining today but libraries are attempting to do the seed banks. Obviously, you need volunteers. You need community to contribute seed and that's kind of the hard part, you know? People aren't used to doing that. They keep to their own crops, but they don't think about maybe taking that extra step, going down to the local library, having everything labeled. You know they know it's a tomato, but they forgot to write down the name of the tomato. You know, that type of thing. So there's a lot of education that's needed within the community for seed saving on that level.

OWEN: Right.

JUDITH: But we're getting there!

OWEN: Yeah, I went to...I saw a great little seed bank at the Simsbury Public Library when I was speaking with the Hartford Chapter of the BFA. They had them in little card catalogues, and it was very sweet. And I think

maybe the first seed library was started by Hudson Valley Seed Company, which is an awesome company in Hudson Valley, New York. And since then there are hundreds if not thousands throughout the country. People may find that there's one right there in their community.

JUDITH: Right.

OWEN: I mean it does take a lot of coordination but it's a great place to start. I think, you know, a lot of times perfection, is the enemy of functional or good. So really just get started.

JUDITH: Yeah, just get started. Take one seed and do it, you know? Act today!

Anything else you'd like to add?

OWEN: What else? Well, um I would say one piece we didn't touch a lot on, we just kind of mentioned it here. I try to work with farms that have some element of community, food sovereignty to it. So, for example, with my partner's farm or with Soul Fire Farm outside of Albany New York, or East New York Farms in Brooklyn New York, a lot of the groups that I work with, I work with them because I really admire the way that they're coming up with solutions to those food access problems in their communities. I wanted to make sure that that is something we mention on this program as well. And that's really where I come to this work from. And you know working with them around seed saving and seed production my hope is that that just deepens, helps to deepen the work that they're doing in their community and the connection that their community members feel to the food and the seeds that they're producing. And it's important to me beyond my passion for nature and my passion for seeds to always also **stay focused on the kind of structural inequities in our society and how can we make a difference at the community level.** Of course, the policy level is important too. But with the seeds they're both metaphorical and very concrete ways to address some of these issues in the community. And so again, I just wanted to throw that out there that there are a lot of people who are coming up with solutions. Right now, we see a lot of problems and there are a lot of people coming up with solutions and I'm excited to support that in small ways through Truelove Seeds.

JUDITH: Well thank you for that, because that's my deepest desire and passion and intention with this series is to get folks like you to be more well-

known in some way, if I can contribute to that in some way. We have to help each other out or we're sunk. You know I think we're learning that. It doesn't matter where we live anymore. The internet connects us and what I love about gardening is that we have an inner net. We have this beautiful underground that is so metaphorical for our above ground life, you know? The other piece that I really appreciate from your message is cultivating a relationship with all aspects of working with our land. We don't have to have a garden to have a relationship with our land and that's the piece that I'm trying to promote as well. And the other piece that you mentioned is that the species are our relatives and my native ancestors and elders that I worked with would say to me something like you know, brother fox showed up today. And when we refer to our nature or natural world in that way it automatically begins a relationship.

OWEN: Right, I mean, and we've allowed over the generations that relationship to be broken and taken from us and I think this is a step towards rebuilding and reclaiming and mending that relationship.

JUDITH: Absolutely. Well that's a great way for us to end our chat today.

Could you leave us with your contact information?

OWEN: Sure, my website is [www.trueloveseeds.com](http://www.trueloveseeds.com) People can get in touch with me at [Trueloveseeds@gmail.com](mailto:Trueloveseeds@gmail.com) I'm also on Instagram at seedkeeping on Facebook at Truelove Seeds and on Tumbler at [seedkeeping.tumblr.com](http://seedkeeping.tumblr.com)

JUDITH: Wonderful. Well thank you again for your time and sharing your expertise and your enthusiasm and most of all your passion for being a part of the solution, and I'm really grateful.

OWEN: Well thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

JUDITH: Okay folks. Well thank you again for joining us at The Holistic Nature of Us. As I said I'm very inspired and Owen has offered us a lot of practical advice today and I hope you'll take one of his tips and think about it for your garden plans.

This is Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of "At the Garden's Gate", book and blog. My book is available through my website <https://www.judithdreyer.com> as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon,

Nook, Goodreads and more. I'd like to remind all of you that a transcript is available for each podcast. And please like and share these podcasts. Let's get the word out and support each other.

And remember, **NOW** is the time for practical action and profound inner change, so we value our world again.

Enjoy your day.