

UC Davis creates cradle for new breeders

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The north-western part of the Netherlands proudly calls itself 'Seed Valley'. With a nudge and a wink to its successful role model, Silicon Valley, it hopes to strengthen the regional economics by cooperation between companies. This year it is supporting the start of the European Plant Breeding Academy.

Of old, the north-western part of the Netherlands has been the centre of vegetable and ornamental seed production, breeding and seed technology. Since 2008, it has been nicknamed Seed Valley. When you name a region as flat as the northern part of the Netherlands a valley, there must be something more to it. It is a metonym that refers to a concentration of over 35 companies involved in breeding, producing, treating and selling seeds, cuttings and young plants.

Namesake

For over a century, the region has been the cradle of many new vegetable and ornamental varieties and, as such, has a name to uphold. Just as Silicon Valley, the high-tech businesses in an area south of San Francisco, USA, is named after the most important compound in computer chips, Seed Valley refers to the most important product of the north-western part of the Netherlands. Five of the most important global vegetable seed producers have a branch, if not their head offices, in Seed Valley: Bejo Zaden, Enza Zaden, Nickerson-Zwaan (part of Limagrain), Seminis (part of Monsanto) and Syngenta. The Seed Valley Foundation is focused on cooperating in several fields. The member companies want to form a knowledge centre, cooperate in pre-competitive research, strengthen their economic and political

influence, and invest in attracting skilled personnel. The latter is one of the major problems all agricultural and horticultural companies are facing. Skilled labourers are difficult to come by, but academics are also hard to find. As everywhere around the globe, breeders in particular have become scarce in the Netherlands and, thus, in its north-western province.

Hope

But there is hope that the tide is turning. In March, the newly founded European Plant Breeding Academy started a two year course in Europe. Over a period of 36 days, individuals already involved in breeding will be able to attend a course at master level and become fully trained plant breeders. This is being organised by the Davis Plant Breeding Academy of the University of California in partnership with European institutions and associations. The University of California at Davis has a long history in breeding. From the late 1940s on, it has released new varieties in numerous crops, from walnut to strawberry and from barley to grapes. In 2006, it started a part-time course consisting of six modules of six days alongside the full-time undergraduate and graduate study programmes. The programme covers genetics, statistics, and plant breeding and is designed to balance lectures, discussions, workshops and field trips with commercial breeders to enhance the experience across breeding systems, crops and countries. The principal trainers are Rale Gjuric, president and managing director of Haplotech Inc., a plant breeding service company in Canada, and Idy van Leeuwen, owner of Breedwise, a training company for plant breeding in the Netherlands. This spring, fourteen students started the course with the first six day programme in the Seed Biotechnology Centre at UC Davis Department of Plant Sciences. The other locations of the course are Angers in France, Enkhuizen in the Netherlands, Barcelona in Spain, and Gatersleben in Germany. The students are employed by Norddeutsche Pflanzenzucht Lembke (NPZ) in Germany, Chia Tai Co. in Thailand, Monsanto and Semillas Fito in Spain, Bayer CropSciences in Belgium, Deutsche Saatveredelung AG in Germany, Zeraim Gedera Ltd. and Hazera Genetics in Israel, Syngenta in France, and Boreal Plant Breeding Ltd. in Finland.

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