Bantam: plant GMO-free and enjoy!

Fresh, fertile, free – growing the 100 year old sweet corn variety "Golden Bantam" could become Germany's new sport of the year

"It has an unbelievably delicious natural sweetness," says Dutchman Wim Brus, who for 20 years has gown and processed seed for the edible maize (sweet corn) variety "Golden Bantam" on his farm "La Torre" in Italy. Brus is continuing a long tradition. In 1902 the family firm W. Atlee Burpee from Philadelphia brought the variety on the market and still offers it today. The maize has to be eaten fresh, as the taste that made it famous turns even a few hours after harvest into an insipid starch, known from animal feed corn. "It's best to put the water on to boil when you go out to the garden to harvest it," suggests Wim Brus.

"Golden Bantam" is a non-hybrid variety, whose grains can be planted as seed, unlike the maize varieties grown for animal feed on 1.4 million hectares in Germany. These are hybrids, combining qualities from different types of maize, but only for one generation. Their grains, if planted, just develop into stunted plants. Whoever plants hybrids must buy new seed every year.

In December 2005 the German authority for plant varieties at the instruction of the new Minister of Agriculture Horst Seehofer approved the first genetically modified variety (Monsanto's Mon 810) for open commercial cultivation. This raises many questions for commercial as well as private seed growers, because GMO-free maize can easily be pollinated by MON 810. Every plant sends million of pollen grains, spread by wind and bees, in the near-by and sometimes more distant surroundings. In seed, for good reason, no traces of genetically modified varieties have been allowed so far. Does that mean that all seeds in the vicinity of genetically engineered field crops have to be tested? Who would pay for this? In addition, a cross between "MON 810" and "Golden Bantam" results in a completely new GMO variety whose cultivation is strictly prohibited. The law on genetic engineering does not address this question. It only says that economic losses have to be compensated for if the GMO contamination exceeds the level requiring labelling in foodstuffs and animal feed.

Does that mean that in areas around GMO-planted fields the open cultivation of non-GMO plants and planting for seed production will be forbidden? What price has the endangerment of the diversity of cultivated plants that goes along with the loss of seeds? What rights are left to private gardeners and seed breeders? Do they have the right to examine the "Genetic Engineering Register", which lists all GMO fields and their operators? Can they demand that GMO cultivation be prevented in their vicinity? To clarify these and other questions, the "Association of GMO-free Seedstock Workers", which includes 14 seed firms and breeding projects, and the initiative "Save our Seeds" have launched the Bantam Maize Action. Their goal is to have 100,000 gardeners, farmers and even balcony planters grow "Golden Bantam" in Germany this year. Whoever grows maize has the right to request from the national consumer protection agency specfic information about near-by locations of genetically-modified corn cultivation. And together we can better achieve the right to free planting and GMO-free seed multiplication in the face of authorities and biotech companies. Spring sowing starts in Germany from mid-April. And in the fall the first 100,000 new fans of Golden Bantam can enjoy its special taste – and harvest their own seed for 2007!

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