

# 2025 Annual Report

## BREEDING DIVERSITY, COMMUNITY, AND HEALTH: MOBILIZING LANDRACE SEED BREEDING IN NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO

### What's Inside

2025 marks the second year of the Breeding Diversity, Community, and Health: Mobilizing Landrace Seed Breeding in Northwestern Ontario project - and what a year it's been! We've worked with seeds, plants, farmers, gardeners, community members, and our project partners to share seeds, knowledge, and produce with folks from across Northwestern Ontario. Read on for an overview of what we got up to in 2025.



A huge thank you to all of the wonderful project partners and sponsors, without whom this project would be as bland and limited as a seedless grocery store watermelon.



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<https://foodsyste.ms.lakeheadu.ca/agroecology-in-canada/>

# About the Project

Landrace seed breeding is a millennia-old sustainable breeding technique that works collaboratively with communities and ecosystems to develop genetically diverse crop populations that produce regionally adapted, stable yields. It is also an accessible way to introduce and involve people to seed saving and sustainable agriculture. Landrace seeds are highly resilient and adaptable to changing environmental conditions. This project aims to breed landraces at the Lakehead University Agricultural Research Station (LUARS), on farms in the Thunder Bay region, and in gardens across northwestern Ontario. Through this work we aim to build landrace breeding capacity and gain a better understanding of the impacts of this practice in supporting resilient regional food systems and seed sovereignty in our region.



Project partners planting squash and watermelon at the Lakehead University Agricultural Research Station; June 10, 2025.

# The 2025 Season in Numbers

2

landraces in 1 acre at  
LUARS

In June we planted out five populations of landrace watermelon developed by Ontario growers alongside a commercial check. The purpose of this planting was to allow us to evaluate the landraces, as well as provide a hands-on learning and seed saving opportunity for community members. We also planted out a winter squash landrace to continue moving towards our breeding goals of growing from direct seeding, with varieties that have great taste and long storage.

Both of these plantings at the LUARS site (watermelon and squash) were also part of Farmer-Led Research projects supported by the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario. Partnering with us on these projects (through replicates in their fields) were Gaia Organic Seeds, Roots Community Food Centre, Root Cellar Gardens, and the Trent University Farm.

1000

watermelon grown and  
1000 lb of squash  
harvested

Over

5000

people engaged with  
landrace seeds and  
crops

In 2025 we engaged with a lot of people in a lot of different ways. In the spring, handbooks and watermelon and squash seeds were sent to **30 participants who signed up to grow out these landraces** in their own gardens. Both watermelon and squash plantings were also part of Farmer-Led Research projects supported by the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario with **replicates being grown at 4 other farms across Ontario**. We **hosted and supported 3 events** (Seed Saturday; Seeds of Change discussion and tour; Fall seed cleaning, squash tasting, and pie making). We **gave out samples of landrace watermelon** grown at LUARS at Hymers Fall Fair and The Good Harvest Market. We **hosted squash tastings** at Seedy Saturday and a garden training event hosted by the Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority. We shared seeds locally and nationally through Going to Seed's Canadian Seed share.



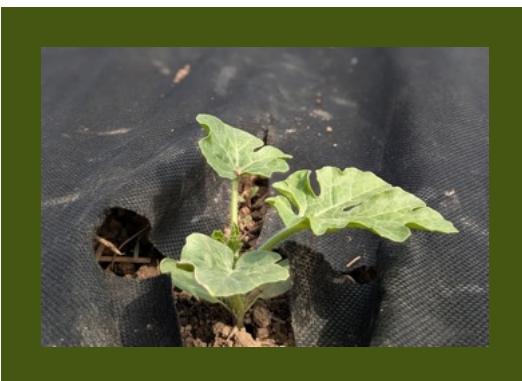
# Growing



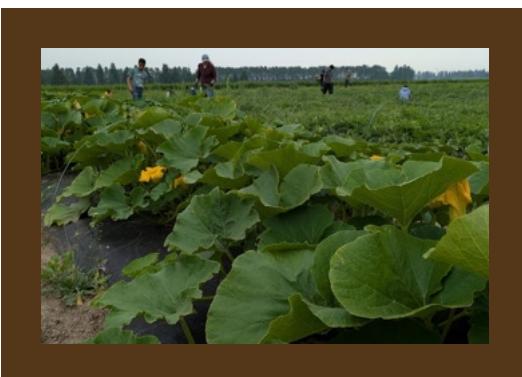
Lanrace squash growing at LUARS, July 2025



Landrace watermelon growing at LUARS, August 2025



Without protection from animals or access to water for watering, we knew the plants we were putting in the ground may have a hard road ahead. Fortunately, rain was abundant and deer were distracted during the growing season.



Plants were thriving at LUARS by mid-summer which made us hopeful for what might come by September (and also hustling to figure out what to do with all the watermelons and squash they looked capable of yielding).



We began harvesting watermelons on August 19. We harvested several times and by the time the last melon was picked we had **harvested 1000** fruit! Squash were harvested on September 16 and yielded approximately **1000 lbs.**

# Showing

Abundance is for sharing and once we started harvesting that's exactly what we did. We had watermelon and squash tasting events at Roots Community Food Centre, The Good Harvest, and Hymers Fall Fair. These events did more than share squash and watermelons, they also provided a meaningful opportunity for folks to engage in food sovereignty.

Our first event (August 29-30) included a panel discussion that brought together farmers and food sovereignty professionals from across Ontario to discuss the work they do, watermelon tasting, and farm tours. Project partners then spent the next two-days at Hymers Fall Fair inviting attendees to taste watermelons grown at LUARS and share their feedback with us. Seeds were saved from the melons community members loved.



Learning to identify and harvest ripe watermelon at LUARS, August 30, 2025



Posing with our award winning watermelon at Hymers Fall Fair, August 31, 2025



Diverse squash harvested at LUARS, September 16 2025



Admiring squash grown by a community grow-out participant, November 22, 2025

Our second event took place November 22 at Roots Community Food Centre. Partnering with Superior Seed Producers, we ran a seed cleaning workshop alongside a squash tasting and pumpkin (well, squash) pie making. We were delighted when several participants in our community grow-out project brought some of the squash that they had grown from the seeds we sent them in the spring.



Community growers with one of the landrace squash they harvested from their garden, November 22, 2025



Learning to save squash Seed at our pie making and seed cleaning event, November 22, 2025



"I don't care about the squash I just want the seeds!" - Community grower November 22, 2025



Pies to share made from landrace squash grown at LUARS, November 22, 2025

Outside of our community, information about the work we have been doing with these watermelons and squash was shared this past year at the Organic Seed Growers conference in Corvallis, OR and the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario Farmer Led Research Symposium. Seeds from the project have been shared with the Going to Seed's [Canadian seed share program](#).

## Exploring the diversity: Comparing watermelon landraces to a commercial variety

**Evalisa McIlwasterick**

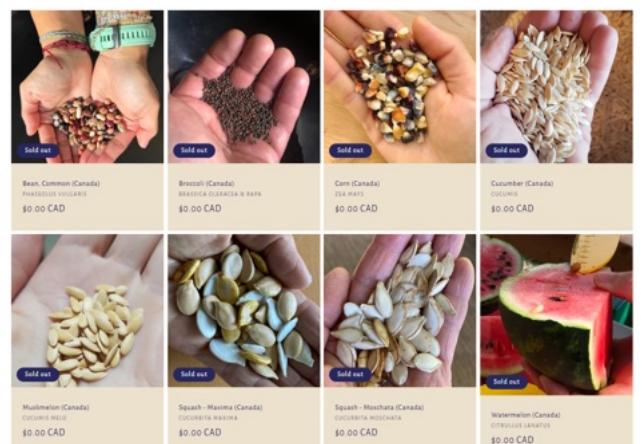
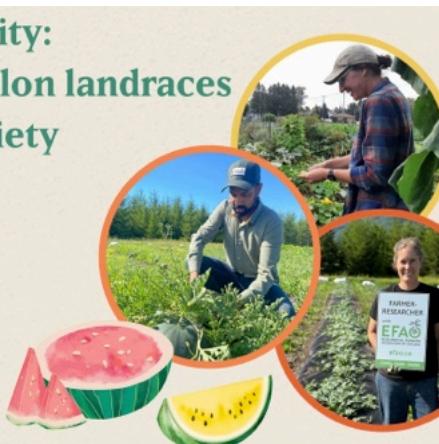
Root Cellar Gardens

**Manish Kushwaha**

Gaia Organics

**Janna Van Blyderven**

Roots to Harvest



# Looking Ahead

We look forward to continuing and expanding our work with these great plants and seeds, partners and participants in 2026. More landrace breeding, farmer-led research and farm-to-farm collaboration, community grow-outs, and events are in the works. Specifically, we are excited to share seeds and collaborate with farmers in Eabametoong First Nations and at the Thunder Bay Correctional Centre. We're also curious to see what comes of some new work we will be doing with Roots Community Food Centre and field grown eggplants. And, we can't wait to bring the work of farmers from across the country to LUARS in the form of the [CANOVI Multi-Coloured Carrot Breeding project](#).



Checking out squash diversity at LUARS with Josh from the Thunder Bay Correctional Centre Farm, August 2025



A carrot from the CANOVI multicoloured carrot breeding project we will be bringing to LUARS in 2026, August 2025



A field tour participant from Eabametoong FN and a very tall sunflower at Root Cellar Gardens, August 2025

## Contact Us

For further information, check out our website at <https://foodecosystems.lakeheadu.ca/agroecology-in-canada/> or email us at [mobilizingseedsandgrowing@gmail.com](mailto:mobilizingseedsandgrowing@gmail.com)



## Learn More...

- Take a deep dive into some of the ideas behind this project: [Becoming-the-dash: Exploring the connections between landrace seed breeding and an ecosocial approach to health. A Master's thesis by Evalisa McIlfaterick \(2024\)](#)
- Read about some of the farmer-led work that this project grew out of: [Evalisa' Ontario Watermelon Project. An article by Kay Everts \(2024\)](#); [Watermelons in Thunder Bay: A Landrace Breeding Project. An article by Sarah Larson \(2024\)](#)
- Check out a presentation about these landrace watermelons give in Corvalis, OR: [Farmer Led Breeding Projects Across Canada. Organic Seed Growers Conference 2025](#).
- See how these landrace watermelons compared to a commercial variety: [EFAO Farmer Led Research Symposium 2025](#)
- Watch the news story about this project that had people at Hymers saying "I heard about you guys in the news!": <https://www.tbnewswatch.com/tbt-news-stories/video-locally-grown-watermelons-project-encourages-economy-11148643>



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