

Editor's note:

For many seed keepers, questions of stewardship extend beyond how seed is grown, saved, and shared. They also touch on where seeds come from, whom they are connected to, and how those relationships are understood and honored over time. In this article, Dr. Mehmet Öztan and Dr. Florentina Rodriguez share their work developing the Culturally Informed Community Seed (CICS) Pledge and Code of Ethics, along with a case study from Two Seeds in a Pod—a seed company founded by Öztan and his wife, Dr. Amy Thompson—that is using this framework in practice. We are sharing this piece as an invitation to think more deeply about the cultural and ethical dimensions of seed stewardship, and about how different approaches attempt to address real gaps and challenges in seed systems. The perspectives offered here are those of the authors, and we recognize that many individuals and organizations across the seed community are engaged in this work through a wide range of models and commitments.



Dr. Amy Thompson and Dr. Mehmet Öztan, co-founders of Two Seeds in a Pod seed company.

THE NEW CULTURALLY INFORMED COMMUNITY SEED PLEDGE AND SEED CODE OF ETHICS

An independent seed company owner is using a new seed pledge and code of ethics to protect culturally and community-meaningful seeds.

Text by Dr. Mehmet Öztan and Dr. Florentina Rodriguez; photos by Love'Yah Stewart (THKLUVLTR)

Seed savers, community plant breeders, and small seed growers function as citizen scientists whose work often intersects with cultural values of communities outside their own. In an increasingly connected world, it is both a challenge and a necessity to find alternative pathways to improve how they interact with those values while adopting ethical seed-stewardship practices. Dr. Mehmet Öztan and Dr. Florentina Rodriguez, public scholars and small-scale seed industry workers, have been immersed in publicly engaged, participatory research to find alternative pathways for seed professionals and community practitioners who work on biocultural restoration and community resilience and who are interested in following these pathways.

In January 2025, after two years of intensive work on conceptualizing a new small-scale seed industry pledge and seed code of ethics in collaboration with other seed scholars in their community networks, Öztan and Rodriguez publicly released the Culturally Informed Community Seed (CICS) Pledge (cicspledge.org). The CICS Pledge was designed to help seed savers, commercial seed growers, and seed-based nonprofit organizations better contextualize complex relationships with seeds and communities of origin by providing self-evaluation tools for determining areas where equity, reciprocity, and respectful stewardship practices could be improved.

WHY WAS A NEW SEED PLEDGE AND CODE OF ETHICS NEEDED?

The CICS Pledge defines culturally and community-meaningful seeds as seeds that come from plants that have retained ancestral, traditional, or cultural relationships with specific communities and places of origin. A helpful definition and style guide primer can be found on the pledge's website to provide further examples and explanations of this and other key terms related to the pledge. For example, as the guide explains:



Two Seeds in a Pod seed packets, filled and labeled for distribution.

“Although corn was first adapted by Indigenous community-based plant breeders in Mesoamerica from its wild relative teosinte, not all modern corn varieties have retained culturally or community-meaningful ties to Indigenous groups while some, like Abenaki Rose, an heirloom Wabanaki variety that together with four other varieties make up the ‘dietary keystone of the Wabanaki agricultural revival,’ has maintained its cultural significance within its community of origin” (Rodriguez, 2025b).

In recent years, the authors noted a surge in seed companies and seed-based nonprofit organizations working with such seeds and promoting themes of social justice, ancestral connections, and conceptualization of seeds as living beings. Many of these organizations connected their work to the Open Source Seed Initiative (OSSI) Pledge, which Öztan and Rodriguez believed may not be the best fit because such seeds benefit from additional input and/or leadership from communities of origin and ethical guidelines for acquisition, mutual benefit sharing, and culturally respectful marketing.

The OSSI Pledge has been a small seed industry standard in the United States since its adoption in 2012. While the OSSI Pledge was inspired



Dr. Mehmet Öztan surveys varieties in the Two Seeds in a Pod seed room.

by the free and open software movement (Open Source Seed Initiative, n.d.) of the 1980s, it is also noted that some of the free software movement's founders have denounced the open source offshoot that was developed in the late 1990s for not valuing the movement's foundational commitments to ethics, justice, and community. In an article titled "Why Open Source Misses the Point of Free Software," Richard Stallman, free software activist and founder of the Free Software Foundation, explains:

"The terms 'free software' and 'open source' stand for almost the same range of programs.

However, they say deeply different things about those programs, based on different values. The free software movement campaigns for freedom for the users of computing; it is a movement for freedom and justice. By contrast, the open source idea values mainly practical advantages and does not campaign for principles. This is why we do not agree with open source, and do not use that term" (Stallman, n.d.).

In a similar way, OSSI founders valued user freedom, such as the right 1) "to save or grow seed for replanting or for any other purpose," 2) "to share, trade, or sell seed to others," 3) "to trial and study seed and to share or publish information about it," and 4) "to select or adapt the seed, make crosses with it, or use it to breed new lines and varieties" (Open Source Seed Initiative, 2025), as a way to combat corporations like Monsanto restricting access to seeds through patents. This focus on user freedom helped OSSI establish and generate practical advantages for an insular network of small, independent seed companies, researchers, and plant breeders. The work of such groups is vital to the preservation of biodiversity, helps steward plants that are the backbone of local and regional ecologies, supports seed keepers to selectively save seeds for climate adaptation purposes, and helps secure critical food sources. However, this work exists within the context of larger systemic inequities. Hence, the freedoms and advantages offered by the OSSI Pledge have not always benefited all seeds, seed keepers, or seed professionals in the same ways.

As more seed-system stakeholders continue to see seeds as carriers of biocultural memory and interwoven legacies, our understanding of what just and ethical seed practices look like must also evolve to prevent gaps between good intentions and potentially harmful impacts. The CICS Pledge helps address these gaps by introducing a new pathway that focuses on seeds' inherent rights that should be protected rather than focusing on the endless freedom claimed by plant breeders and seed companies to use seeds for research projects and marketing. As such, the CICS Pledge and its accompanying code of ethics

conceptualize a model that prioritizes equity for cultural and community-based seed stewardship.

The CICS Pledge asserts the rights of culturally and community-meaningful seeds: 1) to maintain their connections to people, place, and history, 2) to use and source them ethically, 3) to create equitable benefit-sharing models when they are subject to commercialization or research, and 4) to steward them respectfully when they are marketed, selected, adapted, or used for plant breeding (Öztan & Rodriguez, 2025).

HOW DOES THE CICS PLEDGE WORK IN PRACTICE?

To protect the aforementioned seed rights, the CICS Pledge's code of ethics provides guidelines under three main change areas: ethical seed sourcing and the use of plant germplasm, equitable benefits sharing, and respectful stewardship (Öztan & Rodriguez, 2025). Potential signers of the pledge are asked to read through these guidelines and reflect on how their practices may align or could be improved to determine if they are ready to adopt the pledge. By providing a pledge that invites users to adopt changes to their practices and to maintain ethical guidelines for seed usage, the pledge is able to function as an evaluation metric, market-enhancement measure, and precautionary safeguard. Its modular structure allows seed savers and growers to extend the pledge to fit in their own practices and communities' needs by reflecting on those practices.



A hand cups the beautifully patterned seeds of the 'Çekirdeği Oyali' watermelon, a variety introduced to the American seed market by Dr. Mehmet Öztan.

Due to lack of representation of minoritized communities in the small-scale seed industry, culturally significant seeds are also qualitatively misrepresented in seed catalogs. Certain traditional Asian greens are oftentimes associated with “bitter” flavor almost in a way that asserts a negative sensation about the flavor profile of these plants; plants like collard greens that are culturally significant to Black communities in the Southeast region of the United States are only described for their yield with no reference to flavor or traditional uses in most catalogs published outside the region; and a very old crop like wheat is almost always associated with Western European countries without any reference to Türkiye or other Mesopotamian cultures or countries such as Syria or Iraq, although wheat was domesticated in this region. As such, the CICS Pledge was also designed to help seed companies improve their seed descriptions.

Rather than claiming to be a one-stop shop to improve ethical seed-stewardship practices, the CICS Pledge offers flexible tools for a multitude of use cases. These tools can be applied in various ways, including helping a commercial seed grower better their practice of growing a particular seed for a seed company, providing guidance to an independent plant breeder who intends to use a traditional seed of a particular community to breed a new plant, and functioning as a reminder of the importance of relationships for a seed company that sells seeds for crops that are not culturally significant for the ownership of that company.

A CICS Pledge educational toolkit that includes two guides for discussion and reflection was also created as part of Rodriguez’s doctoral dissertation, *They Forgot We Were Seeds: Critical Counter-Narratives Supporting Culturally Informed Community Seed Work*. These guides provide opportunities for individuals or groups of learners to think through the *intentions* and *impact* of current seed pledges and seed industry practices, and to review and evaluate specific concepts and practices included in the new CICS/COE (Rodriguez, 2025a). These guides can be found in the dissertation’s appendix and are currently available as free downloads from Antioch University’s AURA database (aura.antioch.edu/etds/1125) and OhioLink.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE FOR SIGNERS TO PRACTICE THE CICS PLEDGE?:

A CASE STUDY FROM TWO SEEDS IN A POD

Öztan first became familiar with Seed Savers Exchange in 2011, a year before he initiated the Anatolian Heirloom Seeds Recovery and Preservation (ANATOHUM) Project, which aims to preserve and document agrobiodiversity of his homeland of Türkiye. He said:



Florentina Rodriguez saves seeds in the field.

“SSE’s *Yearbook* fascinated me with members’ listings of hundreds of seed varieties, and I was pleasantly surprised to see a few Turkish varieties listed as part of SSE’s own seed collection. Shortly after, I requested those seeds to grow them as part of the ANATOHUM Project, at a time when I was also trying to understand common practices used to write seed descriptions and the ways in which seeds were collected from other places to be grown and adopted in the public domain in the United States.”

Two years later, in 2013, he co-started a seed company, Two Seeds in a Pod, with his wife, Dr. Amy Thompson, to further the ANATOHUM Project’s goals and extent. Since then, the company has introduced more than 150 seed varieties to the American seed market and currently offers more than 250 seed varieties in its catalog. Öztan added:

“It is a challenge to take care of an ever-expanding seed catalog, and what is even more challenging but necessary is to continuously self-evaluate my practices to do a better job with various operational tasks of our company, from adopting better seed-stewardship practices to better aligning seed descriptions in our catalog for each seed’s cultural significance.”

When the CICS Pledge and the code of ethics associated with it became public in early 2025, Öztan incorporated them into Two Seeds in a Pod’s practices, and now the seed packets bought by customers come with a “CICS-Pledges Seeds” label on the back of the packets to raise awareness for the pledge’s content and power. Öztan also only works with small growers who are based in the United States and who adopt ethical seed-stewardship

practices to grow stock seed for many seed varieties in Two Seeds in a Pod's catalog.

In June 2025, he took over the Turkish seed collection in Seed Savers Exchange's archive when Michael Washburn, then SSE's preservation director, reached out to him. Once grown for preservation, plant breeding and/or seed catalog purposes, these seeds will also be listed under the CICS Pledge.

HOW CAN OTHERS SIGN THE CICS PLEDGE AND ADOPT THE CODE OF ETHICS?

Although no one pledge will be the best fit for every seed or seed keeper/practitioner, the CICS Pledge's code of ethics can help all seed-system stakeholders reflect on questions to guide them on their own journey of evolving and improving their practices. The CICS Pledge was designed to co-exist with other available seed-industry metrics to provide an alternative solution for seed scholars who seek one. Öztan and Rodriguez express a need for more practical tools created by others to offer solutions for pressing problems such as seed-labor practices and ethical seed sourcing for the organic seed market in the United States. Organizations or individuals interested in signing the CICS Pledge should first visit cicspledge.org to download the pledge and review the code of ethics. After reviewing the CICSP/COE, applicants can share their readiness to become pledge signers by sending a request, along with introductory and/or company information, to contact@cicspledge.org. Öztan and Rodriguez will review these requests and follow up by sending the CICS Pledge onboarding form. This form allows applicants to use a self-evaluation tool to review guided checklists of code of ethics principles and to declare that either their current practices are already in alignment or they are taking steps toward alignment, and to share a brief summary of what that looks like for them. This supports the pledge's emphasis on improvement rather than perfection, and on flexibility in determining how to apply ethical principles in and amend for different situations and settings.

Once this form is submitted online, applicants will be added to the list of pledge signers posted at cicspledge.org/cics-community. Plant breeders, including commercial plant breeders and seed savers working on regional adaptation or stewardship of culturally significant germplasm, may also request to be added to the website's "Community Plant Breeders" page. Signers may then use the pledge, as follows, in their marketing and promotions:

"I respect the natural rights of seeds and their people by producing CICS-Pledged seeds under the pledge's culturally informed practices and code of ethics. I am including this pledge with any transfer of seeds or their derivatives to ask others to continue following these guidelines."

Dr. Mehmet Öztan is a Turkish seed saver, commercial seed grower, farmer and the co-owner of Two Seeds in a Pod seed company (twoseedsinapod.com). He is also the founder of the Anatolian Seeds Recovery and Preservation (ANATOHUM) Project that aims to revitalize, preserve, document, and promote the traditional seeds of Türkiye. He was named a 2024 Appalachian Foodways Practitioner Fellow and was nominated for the James Beard Foundation's Leadership Award in Industry Culture and Practices category. He was also featured in Homegrown Foodways in West Virginia: Turkish Cuisine with Mehmet Öztan.

Dr. Florentina Rodriguez is a biracial CHamoru seed educator, seed librarian, and cooperative farmer. She acts as an advisory board member for Ohio's BIPOC Food & Farming Network (BFFN) and Seven Seed Sowers Cooperative. Rodriguez founded the Miami Valley Seed Commons to support community-based food systems and regional resilience. She also serves as the director of research and project development for The Lavender Project (lavenderproject.org) and as programs director for The Agraria Center for Regenerative Practice (agrariacenter.org/agrariafarm).

REFERENCES

- U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). U.S. and world population clock. U.S. Department of Commerce. Retrieved January 9, 2020, from census.gov/popclock/
- Open Source Seed Initiative. (n.d.). *History*. Retrieved November 26, 2025, from osseeds.org/the-open-source-seed-initiative-growing-access-to-a-liberated-domain-of-plant-genetic-diversity/
- Open Source Seed Initiative. (2025, December 3). *About*. Retrieved December 16, 2025, from osseeds.org/about/
- Öztan & Rodriguez. (2025). Culturally-Informed Community Seed Pledge and Code of Ethics. Retrieved December 16, 2025, from cicspledge.org/
- Rodriguez, F. (2025a). They Forgot We Were Seeds: Critical Counter-Narratives Supporting Culturally Informed Community Seed Work. aura.antioch.edu/etds/1125
- Rodriguez, F. (2025b). Culturally-Informed Community Seed Pledge and Code of Ethics (CICSP/COE): Definitions and Style Guide Primer. Retrieved December 16, 2025, from cicspledge.org/resources/
- Stallman, R. (n.d.). Why open source misses the point of free software. GNU Operating System. gnu.org/philosophy/open-source-misses-the-point.html