

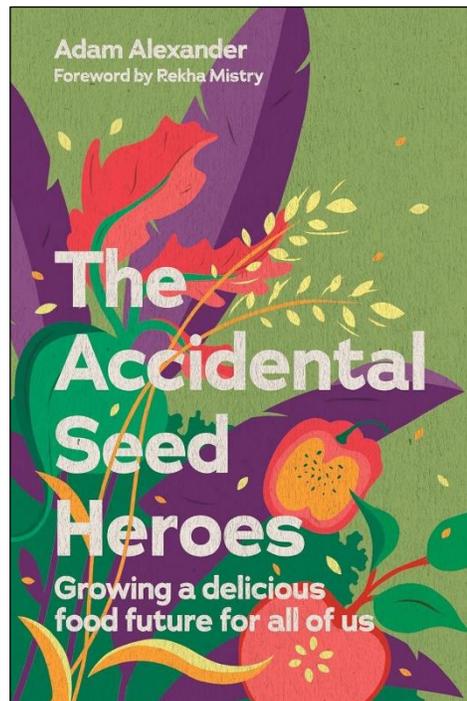
Celebrating champions of crop diversity

Book review by

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Review of *The Accidental Seed Heroes: Growing a Delicious Food Future for All of Us*, by Adam Alexander. (2025). Published by Chelsea Green Publishing. Available as hardcover and audiobook (read by the author); 304 pages. Publisher's website: <https://www.chelseagreen.com/product/the-accidental-seed-heroes/>



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Adam Alexander's second book, *The Accidental Seed Heroes* (2025), follows his first, *The Seed Detective* (2022), which focused on the origins of

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popular vegetables from wild ancestors to common cultivars. This time, Alexander places the people who maintain and foster crop diversity at the center of his story. As a passionate gardener and amateur plant breeder, Alexander's message is clear: crop diversity (or agrobiodiversity) is essential, property rights regimes are a detriment to diversity, and seeds should be a public good. He deftly illustrates challenges and successes in plant breeding with cases from countries like Albania, Denmark, Ethiopia, India, and his home in Wales. Here, his journalist background shines through with rich descriptions that would feel at home in a travel magazine.

Attention on seeds and genetic resources has waxed and waned since the mid-1910s, beginning

with Vavilov's work on centers of crop diversity—first translated to English in 1992 (Nair, 2019, p. 113; Zimmerer et al., 2019, p. 4). It arguably last reached its peak in public consciousness with the opening of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway in 2008 (Nair, 2019, p. 114). *The Accidental Seed Heroes* is a welcome addition to bookshop shelves to bring agrobiodiversity back into the zeitgeist as our food systems face increasingly frequent and severe shocks and stressors.

Alexander opens the book with a crash course in plant breeding and the rise of the intellectual property rights (IPR) regime on seeds and other plant genetic materials (chapter 1). He keeps an even keel in providing enough scientific background and historical context without getting into the minutiae, which should balance academics' desire for specificity with the general public's need for accessibility. Here, the groundwork is laid for him to take us through the stories of specific crops in the following chapters, focusing on how seeds became privatized and why this is detrimental to farmers, breeders, and global food systems' resilience.

With our plant breeding and IPR context in hand, Alexander takes us out of the classroom and into the fields of Albania and Ethiopia (chapter 2) "where farmers' varieties reign supreme" (p. 31). These contexts are revisited in later chapters for crop-by-crop stories, but here he takes time to paint a picture of what agrobiodiverse landscapes look like, how they have stayed this way, and the imminent threats they face. For readers whose point of reference is industrialized, monoculture-based agricultural systems, this paints a somewhat utopian picture of what agriculture could look like and gives space to the unnamed smallholders in these contexts, as well as a few white-coat professors.

Alexander devotes the rest of his book to a deep dive into eight crops and the "heroes" who preserve their diversity and breed new varieties. He uses some crops as an example to illustrate a breeding technique (such as dehybridizing tomatoes, in chapter 7) or an IPR challenge (such as utility patents on lettuce, in chapter 9, or licensing apples, in chapter 11). For others, he writes with fervor

about exciting initiatives and often with personal anecdotes of the seeds he has brought home to his garden and grown himself.

The book falters slightly in chapter 4, where he attempts to zoom out to the causes of vulnerabilities in food systems brought about by monocultures and monopolization. While broadly sufficient, readers from the general public may have benefited from more context on the roots of concentration in crop diversity and agribusinesses as written about by Jennifer Clapp (2023). At other times, he strives to connect crop diversity to famine, but repeats commonly held truths such as "it is conflict more than anything else that precipitates famine" (p. 80), despite the questionable factual basis of this concept (as written about by Martin-Shields and Stojetz [2019]). The chapter might better have been spent unpacking diversity's role in building resilience; nevertheless, Alexander succeeds in making his point that monocultures can increase vulnerability.

By the conclusion, it is clear that the individuals in Alexander's cast of characters are not "accidental seed heroes." While their motivations may vary, each is deeply committed to maintaining crop diversity or breeding delicious, resilient, and locally adapted cultivars. The truly "accidental" heroes are the idealized, but critical, smallholder farmers in Ethiopia and Albania who are bastions of crop diversity, whereas the independent and institutionally affiliated breeders who make up the bulk of the book take on this work with passion and acute awareness of the systems-level value it has.

The Accidental Seed Heroes is an excellent read for a crash course in plant breeding and the importance of crop diversity for the general public. For researchers familiar with the topic, it is a treat to learn the stories of specific breeders and initiatives, even if the overall thesis is far from new terrain. Other books have already delved deep into the importance of crop diversity for resilience (Fowler & Mooney, 1990). Alexander is an exciting addition to the chorus of voices championing crop diversity because, through his own story and those of his "heroes," he centers joy. For him, crop diversity is exciting because it is our heritage, it is place-making, and it makes for delicious meals. 

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