

## Who Owns Johnny's?

Johnny's Selected Seeds was a sole proprietorship from January 1973 until July 1975, when the company was incorporated in Maine. Over the years, Johnny's has grown on the good graces of its customers and the company never received investments from any source. This changed in July 2006, when Johnny's Selected Seeds took investment from its employees. Johnny's Selected Seeds employees own 30% of the company with 100% ownership expected in 2015.

Johnny's Selected Seeds has no affiliation with Monsanto Company.

A concerned customer wrote a letter to Johnny's and asked for a personal response from Rob. The customer's letter and Rob's response addresses the question of "Who owns Johnny's" and Johnny's sourcing of seeds with Seminis, a division of Monsanto. Both Rob and the author of the letter have consented to the posting of this exchange to help dispel the erroneous rumor that Monsanto owns Johnny's.

Customer letter that was e-mailed to Rob:

> Date: Thu, 26 Feb 2009 11:29:55 -0500  
> To: <[publicrelations@johnnyseeds.com](mailto:publicrelations@johnnyseeds.com)>  
> Subject: Monsanto seeds  
>  
> Hello  
> This is addressed exclusively to Rob Johnston Jr. please.  
> I have ordered seeds from your company every year since perhaps 1982,  
> if not in my own name, under my previous married name. Two years ago, I  
> read Barbara Kingsolver's book, ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MIRACLE. I was  
> greatly dismayed to read on page 52 the following, "Agribusiness can  
> patent plant varieties for the purpose of removing them from production  
> (Seminis dropped 25 % of its total product line in one recent year, as  
> a "cost-cutting measure"), leaving farmers with fewer options each  
> year. This is true for home gardeners, who rarely suspect when placing  
> orders from Johnny's, Territorial, Nichols, Stokes, and dozens of other  
> catalogs that they're likely buying from Monsanto."  
> I am very opposed to genetic modification of seeds , particularly when  
> they have a destroyer gene that does not allow poor farmers to save  
> seeds from their crops for planting the following year. I also am  
> deeply opposed to Round-up and all chemicals, and to Monsanto's  
> monopoly of seed production and distribution. I believe that  
> biodiversity and organic growing methods are crucial to our environment  
> and the people of the world. If appropriate practices are used to  
> promote soil health, genetic modification is not necessary. At this  
> critical time in the history of our planet, I feel we have to  
> re-examine our priorities, especially when it comes to the growing and  
> TRANSPORTING of food.  
> Please talk to me about this. I did not order from you last year  
> because of this, and I want to hear your thoughts. Your mission begs  
> the question of why you would trade with Monsanto, and why all your  
> seeds aren't organic.  
> Your courteous reply to my query will say alot about your conviction to  
> "helping families, friends and communities feed one another"

Rob's response to the customer:

I'm glad that you finally wrote to me. Thank you.

I know about Barbara Kingsolver's book, but haven't read it, and hadn't seen the passage that you quoted.

Monsanto is primarily involved in the big acreage agricultural crops like corn, soybeans, cotton, and canola; they are less involved in horticultural crops, i.e. vegetables, flowers, and herbs. Monsanto's bread and butter is selling genetically engineered "traits" to plant breeders on a royalty basis, for example a trait conferring herbicide resistance.

The plant breeder then utilizes ordinary plant breeding (manipulation of mating) to transfer the engineered trait to his/her parent lines. The breeder (breeder's company) sells the finished varieties and pays Monsanto a royalty. The only horticultural seeds that I know of that contain engineered traits are sweet corn (Monsanto and Syngenta developed traits) and summer squash.

Johnny's has never sold a variety with engineered traits.

For about four years Monsanto has been directly involved in vegetable seeds, since buying Seminis Vegetable Seeds, a California company.

Seminis is a consolidation of a number of formerly independent seed companies, including Royal Sluis (Netherlands), Petoseed (US), Asgrow (US), and Hungnong (Korea). It was a Mexican owner/conglomerator. Seminis is international, with its head office in Oxnard, California. In 2003 the Mexican owners (along with the public that owned a portion of the stock) sold to Fox Paine, a US investment group. In early 2005 Fox Paine sold Seminis to Monsanto.

Consolidations are usually not beneficial to the customer, and these are no exception. With the original Seminis consolidation came a reduction of service and a focus on big acreage markets, not the needs of Johnny's core customers which are the specialty and small commercial growers and avid home gardeners.

So for probably 15 years now we have been active in finding alternatives to Seminis varieties, with a preference for products from independents. Presently Johnny's carries about 40 Seminis varieties, which is about 4% of our vegetable varieties. Our intention is to continue replacing them.

The Monsanto acquisition isn't surprising. It's unfortunate, but it isn't a huge deal for Johnny's and our customers in terms of variety selection. And practically Johnny's doesn't have to make a shift, since we were already working to minimize their presence.

A lot of people got from the Kingsolver book that Monsanto owns

Johnny's. Neither Monsanto nor any of their affiliates owns any of Johnny's. Johnny's is owned by my wife, Janika, and I and most of the other employees of Johnny's. To date the employees, via an Employee Stock Ownership Trust, have acquired 30.44% of the stock. The plan is for them to have acquired and paid for 100% by 2015.

I agree with your preference for an organically grown and more local food supply. The big seed companies are focused on the big acreage productions, both for processing and fresh market. They have less, sometimes no, interest in small acreage growers. There is an increase these days that you, no doubt, have noticed of small farmers growing produce for local and regional markets, and the "local foods" trend that is fueling that increase. Seeds from the big companies are in declining usage by these small growers. The big seed companies' varieties are oriented largely to mass markets and shipping. A portion of those varieties will work for the small growers, but the local niches want quality traits not always available. That's where Johnny's comes in -- these smaller commercial growers and avid home gardeners are our bread and butter.

I don't see plant genetic resources being locked up by the conglomerates, because the germplasm collections are public.

My main concern about Monsanto is the consolidation. I have watched consolidating in the seed industry since 1973 when I started Johnny's. With each consolidation something is lost for the customer, the farmer or gardener, and, by extension, the consumer. Monsanto has a considerable consolidation now in vegetable seeds.

You might be interested in [www.seedquest.com](http://www.seedquest.com). At the Seed Quest website you can follow press releases and seed industry news -- the lion's share of it is from the big companies. But it will give you the flavor of the seed world out there, and how the individual small farmers and gardeners need a trustworthy place to go that can competently screen through all of it.

Organically grown seeds. The percentage of our seeds that are organically grown is increasing. It's our intention to continue working on that. Since the beginning of Johnny's I've been most enthusiastic about the product development, i.e. giving our customers improved varieties to support their farm and home economies and quality of life. While I've always been interested in the seed production, as I'd have to be to grow a seed company, the production has been behind the product development in my priorities. In addition to our own plant breeding work here, we screen hundreds of varieties each year from dozens of cooperators. That's how we make decisions about product line changes. Typically a new variety will be proprietary with the originator, and we have nothing to say about how their seed production is farmed.

So while we prefer organically grown seeds, the majority of the varieties that we carry are not OG. As you might know, certified organic farmers are allowed to use non-OG seeds "if equivalent OG seeds are not available." In practice that means that if a variety that an organic farmer wants to use is not available OG, s/he may use the non-OG seeds as long as those seeds are not treated with chemical fungicides or other non-approved seed treatments.

There are a number of companies that carry only OG seeds. Do you know about High Mowing Seeds in Wolcott, Vermont? <http://www.highmowingseeds.com> They are one of the best of the only-OG seed companies focusing on vegetable seeds. Their product line is limited compared to Johnny's because of the unavailability of many important varieties grown organically, but they are doing well within that constraint.

With conventional agriculture becoming more environmentally friendly and organic agriculture becoming more technically sophisticated, my vision is that the two will become merged. But that's getting a bit off-topic.

Have I answered your questions? Please write if you would like clarification, elaboration, if I have missed something, or if you have additional questions. You are also welcome to call me at 1 (877) 564-6697, extension 427.

I hope you don't mind that I am going to send a copy of this to a few people at Johnny's who will be interested.

Sincerely,  
Rob Johnston

Comments and concerns about this topic may either be addressed to [publicrelations@johnnyseeds.com](mailto:publicrelations@johnnyseeds.com) or please feel free to talk to Rob Johnston as he has invited.