



**John Wahlert, Wild West Seed
Albany, Oregon**



The name *Wild West Seed* conjures up pictures of rough riders in the chaparral, but the reality is something quite different, though equally challenging. John Wahlert, one of the owners of the company, aims to pass on a lifetime of learning every facet of producing quality seed to a new generation, which is no easy task.

“Growing up, I had a rare opportunity,” says Wahlert. “I got to hang around the legends: the Deserts of Desert Seed Company, the Petos of Petoseed, and Joe Harris of Harris Seeds. They built the seed industry!” Two of his three sons are now soaking up everything Wahlert has learned

about keeping the quality of his open-pollinated seed high. That means roguing off-types multiple times throughout the season, finding and overseeing quality growers, isolating crops to avoid unwanted cross-pollination—and that’s just the production end of the business!

Focus on Families

John Wahlert was raised in eastern Oregon, in the wholesale seed business—his father started Bill Wahlert Seed Company (later sold to Dorsing Seeds) in 1970. When he joined Wild West Seed six months after the company was started by Ken Hilbert in 1998 it was primarily a wildflower seed production company (thus the “Wild” in the name). Flowers and wildflower mixes are still an important part of the business, but Wahlert added vegetables and herbs to the product line, and proudly grows many of the same varieties his father grew in the 70s and 80s. Continuing the family tradition, one of Wahlert’s sons helps manage the warehouse operations in Oregon, where the company is based, while another is in charge of seed production in Idaho. With Hilbert’s son Matt also involved in the business, Wild West Seed is consciously planning for the future, not just of the company but of the industry itself. “It’s important that we train younger growers,” Wahlert emphasizes. “And we learn from them, too.”



Wild West Seed began as a wildflower seed production company.

Keeping Open-Pollinated Seed Alive and Well

From the beginning, Wild West Seed chose to focus on producing and distributing open-pollinated seed, rather than hybrids. “The seeds we grow have been around for 100 years,” says Wahlert. So it’s not so much about bringing new and different varieties to the market, but about keeping the valuable, reliable heirlooms true-to-type and viable. The reason wholesale buyers and distributors keep coming back, he says, is that they trust the product. Eighty-five percent of the seeds on the product list are produced directly for the Wild West Seed, which means that the company has a lot to say about how the lettuce, radishes, turnips, chard, and many other types of seed are grown and processed.

Highest Priority: Growers

Contracting with growers in eastern Oregon and western Idaho, California, Washington, and beyond allows Wild West Seed to take advantage of the different growing conditions found on 20- to 30-acre fields throughout the western United States and in other parts of the world as well. Cabbage and chard prefer the mild winters of Oregon, while lettuce, carrots, and turnips grow best in Idaho. “Our growers are our highest priority,” Wahlert states. With quality growers, decades of seed-growing experience, and careful management, it’s no wonder that Wild West Seed has become one of the major wholesale producers of open-pollinated vegetable seed in the country.