

Potato and biodiversity

By conserving – and utilizing – the potato genetic diversity developed by their ancestors, small farmers in the Andes are helping ensure world food security



Key points

Potato farming systems need a continuous supply of new varieties drawn from the entire potato gene pool.

Potato biodiversity is under threat – ancient varieties cultivated for millennia have been lost and wild species are threatened by climate changes.

Smallholder farming systems in the Andes encourage cross-pollination of potato flowers, vital to sustaining the diversity of local, farmer-developed varieties.

With CIP support, Andean communities have created a “potato park” holding some 1 200 traditional varieties of potato.

The history of the potato provides a grim warning of the need to maintain genetic diversity in our staple food crops. In the 19th century, Ireland was heavily reliant on only a few varieties of potato, and those types contained no resistance to the devastating disease known as late blight. When late blight destroyed the 1845-1846 potato crop, widespread famine followed. An estimated one million people starved to death and more than a million were forced to migrate abroad.

To combat pests and diseases, increase yields, and sustain production on marginal lands, today’s potato-based agricultural systems need a continuous supply of new varieties. That requires access to the entire potato gene pool. But potato biodiversity is under threat: ancient varieties cultivated by Andean peoples for millennia have been lost to diseases, climate change and social upheaval.

Species and crop-associated diversity

While most varieties of potatoes belong to a single species, *Solanum tuberosum*, about 10 other *Solanum* species have been cultivated, and 200 wild species have been recorded. Climate change may threaten the survival of those wild relatives: it is forecast that as many as 12 percent will become extinct as their growing conditions deteriorate. If climate



Farmers sort varieties at Peru’s “potato park”. Photo: © CIP

Centre of origin

In the Andean region, generations of farmers have domesticated thousands of potato varieties. Even today, farmers cultivate up to 50 varieties on their farms. In the biodiversity reserve of the Chiloé archipelago in Chile, local people cultivate about 200 varieties of native potato. They use farming practices transmitted orally by generations of mainly women farmers.

changes drastically, the area where wild potatoes grow naturally could be reduced by as much as 70 percent.

Since potatoes mostly propagate vegetatively, most commercial varieties of potato have a reduced ability to flower and breeders do not select for traits that make the flower attractive to pollinators. However, natural potato pollination remains important to sustaining the diversity of land races (farmer-developed varieties that are adapted to local environmental conditions). Fortunately, the diverse smallholder farming systems in the Andes harbour a variety of flowering plants that do attract pollinators, such as honeybees and bumblebees, which promote cross-pollination of potato flowers, thus increasing seed production and sustaining diversity.

International Treaty

The potato is included in the multilateral system established under FAO’s International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

The Treaty, which entered into force in 2004, aims at the conservation and sustainable use of crop plant diversity and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits derived from their use.

Conserving potato biodiversity in the Andes

Having lost many of their traditional potato varieties, Peruvian farmers in the Andes are now taking measures to conserve and sustainably use those that remain. A pact has been signed by six Quechua communities with the International Potato Center that recognizes the rights of the communities over potato strains they have developed.

Under the agreement, the Center's genebank returns potato genetic resources – and knowledge associated with them – to the communities, which have established a “potato park” (*Parque de la papa*) in a conservation area where they grow and manage the plants. This repatriation of biological diversity effectively keeps control of genetic resources local. The 15 000 ha park is a “living library” of potato genetic diversity, holding some 1 200 varieties of potato cultivated in the highlands. A long-term goal is to re-establish all the world's 4 000 known potato varieties in the valley, allowing the park to function as a second centre of origin for this vital staple crop.



Inside CIP's gene bank. Photo: © CIP

Diversity conserved in trust

The International Potato Centre in Peru maintains the world's largest bank of potato germplasm, including some 1 500 samples of about 100 wild species collected in eight Latin American countries, and 3 800 traditional Andean cultivated potatoes. The collection is maintained and managed under the terms of an agreement with the Governing Body of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture and, like all collections eligible for funding from the Global Crop Diversity Trust, is available to plant breeders worldwide upon request.

Credits:

Information provided by the Global Crop Diversity Trust and the Plant Production and Protection Division, FAO.

About IYP 2008

The **International Year of the Potato**, to be celebrated throughout 2008, aims at raising global awareness of the potato's key role in agriculture, the economy and world food security.

www.potato2008.org



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