

Fact Sheet: Understanding Pedigreed and Common Seed

This fact sheet will help you understand the differences and similarities between **pedigreed seed** and **common seed**, and their importance in our seed system.

Both pedigreed and common seed are supported by Canada's Seed Regulations, which have protected farmers for nearly 100 years. But this could soon change – and not necessarily for the benefit of farmers. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) is currently leading a Seed Regulatory Modernization process that could bring in major changes to our system.



What is pedigreed seed?

When seed has a pedigree, its parentage has been documented and can be traced back through several generations. Pedigreed seed is produced according to clear rules, by farmers who are members of the Canadian Seed Growers Association (CSGA). They specialize in seed growing and follow strict practices. Third-party inspection ensures the seed meets high standards for varietal purity.

Some farmers purchase pedigreed seed every year, others use farm saved seed and buy pedigreed seed only when they change varieties or buy pedigreed seed every three to five years in order to maintain the variety's characteristics in their crops. Some farmers prefer to use common seed as a cost saving and to benefit from characteristics present in older varieties that are no longer subject to Plant Breeders Rights (PBR) and which have worked well for other farmers over the years. Some older varieties, while still registered, may no longer be produced by pedigreed seed growers and are only available as common seed from other farmers.

Since all of Canada's major broadacre field crops, with the exception of corn, must be registered varieties, both pedigreed seed and common seed have gone through the quality control system that ensures new varieties perform well in Canadian growing conditions.

What is seed certification?

Canada's seed certification rules assure farmers that the seed's pedigree is known and it has been grown according to strict requirements to maintain varietal purity. Certified seed is a level of pedigreed seed status and is identified by its official blue tag issued by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). The official seed tag information includes the variety name, lot number and grade of the seed. The pedigreed status guarantees the seed is true to type - it has all the characteristics that were demonstrated when the variety was approved for registration. The grade guarantees that the seed lot meets the regulated standards for germination rate and purity in regard to weed seeds and other crop seeds.

Farmers are most familiar with Certified Seed, however there are five levels of pedigreed status that can be granted – Breeder, Select, Foundation, Registered and Certified. These levels indicate the number of generations removed from seed originally produced by a recognized plant breeder. At each level there are standards for production, inspection, documentation and final quality that must be met in order to have its status officially recognized. The standards are detailed in the *Canadian Regulations and Procedures for Pedigreed Seed Crop Production*, which is administered by the CSGA. All Certified seed bought by farmers to produce field crops is produced from seed that can be traced back to the original breeder of the variety.

What is common seed?

The term "common seed" is used in two ways – as a description (common seed) and as a grade (Common Seed).

"Common seed" can be used simply as a descriptive word that means the seed is not identified by a variety name – it could be any variety. Farmers who are not specialized seed growers may sell part of their crops as common seed as long

as it is not sold by name, not grown from a variety covered by Plant Breeders Rights, and not advertised for sale. While common seed is not regulated for varietal purity, it is the progeny of registered varieties that have proven performance qualities. The genetic variations that develop within common seed may be the result of adaptation to local conditions over several years. The resulting genetic diversity may support crop resilience in the face of climate change for farms using common seed.

Common seed does not require traceability of its parentage or strict production methods to ensure varietal purity. Common seed may be seed saved from a commercial crop grown from a variety that is in the public domain. For crops that require variety registration, farmers can sell common seed to one another as long as they do not name its variety or advertise it for sale. For crops such as wheat, barley and oats where variety registration is required, only pedigreed seed can be sold by variety name. Crops that do not require variety registration in Canada, such as garden vegetable seed, can be sold as common seed and can be sold by variety name.

“Common” is also a term used in the official seed grading system. For most crops, the Seeds Regulations grade tables include official grades called Common, Common No. 1 and/or Common No. 2. They have minimum standards for germination and purity from weed seeds and other crop seeds, but they are not certified within the pedigreed seed framework. Pedigreed seed growers may find themselves with a seed crop that did not achieve one of the standards for certification, but does meet the Common grade standard nevertheless. In order to obtain an official Common grade, seed must meet the grade’s standards, and for small seeded crops like forage seed, the grade must be determined by an accredited laboratory.

Why are seed certification and common seed designations important?

Pedigreed and common seed each have important roles in our seed system. Pedigreed seed provides strong protection for farmers through its thorough, transparent and robust production, naming and inspection processes. The ability to buy and sell common seed allows farmers to keep older varieties in circulation and to obtain seed for lower prices and fewer restrictions compared with seed that is subject to Plant Breeders Rights. The demand for older varieties may not be consistent enough for pedigreed seed growers to justify the additional work required to produce certified seed. Access to common seed is particularly valuable for organic farmers as many of the older varieties were developed when crops were grown with fewer inputs. Access to common seed is also critical to ensuring there is enough seed available in the event of widespread crop failure that limits the supply of certified seed.

Seed companies are lobbying for regulatory changes that would severely reduce, or even eliminate access to common seed. Their proposals to require expensive and onerous inspection and grading would discourage farmers from selling common seed. The same companies are lobbying to eliminate our Variety Registration system and Grade Tables, which are essential pillars of our pedigreed system. Farmers need a strong, public-interest focused seed regulatory system to ensure we continue to have access to the quality and diversity of seed we need to farm successfully.

The CFIA’s Seed Regulatory Modernization process will have several opportunities for farmers to make their views known. Let’s make sure that they know we need to retain the integrity of our pedigreed seed system, and that farmers must be able to continue to freely buy and sell common seed produced outside the pedigreed system.

Questions?

Please do not hesitate to reach out for more information about Canada’s seed regulations.

Visit <https://www.nfu.ca/campaigns/save-our-seed/> or email nfu@nfu.ca with “Seed Regulations” in the subject line.

