



COOPERATIVE FUND of New England

Borrower Profile: Fedco Co-op Garden Supply: Seeding the Future

In corporate business, investor-owners often sacrifice product quality and employee compensation to maximize profit. Cooperative businesses counter this through ownership by direct stake-holder groups, often either consumers or workers. Fedco Co-op Garden Supply has been at the forefront of the hybrid co-op trend bringing together both consumers and workers in shared ownership. This innovation has helped them grow into one of the preeminent seed supply sources for cold-climate growers nationwide and a major contributor to conserving rare plant breeds.

Founded in 1978 to sell seeds to 98 co-ops in Maine, Fedco has grown to now offer trees, bulbs, potatoes and other gardening supplies to 25,000 individual and co-op consumers across the country.

While initially Fedco was strictly a consumer co-op, in 1985 they incorporated workers into their ownership structure. Now, workers and consumers split board seats and profits. Like other worker co-ops, Fedco builds financial and emotional investment in the business from the newest part-time workers to the most seasoned managers. "It means when people work at Fedco for the first time," says worker-owner John Bunker, Coordinator of Fedco Trees, "they feel like they are working for themselves, not management. It changes workplace dynamics because we're all in this together."

Consumer ownership brings additional benefits to Fedco. According to CR Lawn, Fedco founder, "our customers, and especially those committed enough

to join our cooperative, have always provided us with helpful advice that has pinpointed where we need to improve our operations and shown the way to enhancing our selections and products." For instance, consumers introduce Fedco to rare plant breeds for propagation and sale, including genetically and historically significant breeds. "Unlike paintings, plants don't need to be in a

museum," says Bunker, "you can propagate and reintroduce them." Fedco has just launched its first consumer membership campaign to expand consumer involvement and strengthen the co-op.

Fedco has further supported the community by raising food policy issues through its catalogs and communications. Most recently they joined a class action law suit against Monsanto, to reduce the chance of genetically engineered contamination of non-transgenic crops.

CFNE has supported Fedco three times by financing its many expansions. Most recently, in 2011, Fedco improved access for suppliers and customers, increased warehouse and office space, and gained land, which will provide opportunities for later expansion. "We love CFNE," says Lawn "and I don't know how we could have

done it without them these last 20-plus years!"

If you're a gardener or tree planter, consider joining Fedco. "By supporting Fedco," says Bunker, "you are growing a community-owned business that prioritizes the needs of its workers, consumers and the broader community over profit." To learn more about Fedco, visit www.fedcoseeds.com.

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-profile by Micha Josephy

