Linking failing health to hybrid seeds, Rahibai Soma Popere of Kombhalne village in Maharashtra conserves hundreds of native varieties and encourages other farmers to grow traditional crops.

Rahibai in her field of native hyacinth bean that she has conserved. (Photo by MITTRA)

“Native crop varieties are not only drought and disease resistant, but are nutritious and retain the soil fertility as they do not need chemical fertilizers and excessive water,” Rahibai Soma Popere tells VillageSquare.in with conviction. Her words are borne out of experience. With a single-minded devotion, Rahibai travels across the four-step paddy cultivation that includes use of paddy straw ash in the nursery before planting and use of Gilricidip sp. leaves as green manure before transplanting seedlings. Her crop yield has increased up to 30% with improved cultivation practices. She has tried and implemented innovative practices such as cultivation of beans on farm bunds. With successful implementation of all that she learnt, Rahibai now trains farmers and students on seed selection, techniques to improve soil fertility and pest management among others. She supplies farmers with seedlings of native crops, encouraging them to switch to native varieties. Rahibai also heads another SHG Chemdeobaba Mahila Bachat Gat in Kombhalne, through which many social initiatives like health camps, supply of solar lamps are organized, besides the agricultural initiatives. Seed mother Raghunath Anant Mashelkar, former Director General of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research has honored her with the title Seed Mother. Along with well-known social activist Anna Hazare, Rahibai chaired a program arranged by Agriculture Technology Management Agency at Ralegan Siddhi. Akole Taluk Patrakar Sangh felicitated her on International Women’s day in 2016, for her work in biodiversity conservation. There have been many recognitions including the one by Krishi Vigyan Kendra of Bhableshwar.

Rahibai being felicitated for her contribution in saving native crops. (Photo by MITTRA)

Five varieties of hyacinth beans conserved by her are being evaluated for morphological and yield traits at Mahatma Phule Krishi Vidyapeeth (MPKV) in Rahuri. Moving forward Having experienced the benefits of growing native crops, Rahibai wants more farmers to start farming the same. Towards this goal, a seed bank has been established. Community members manage the seed bank. Farmers are given seeds with the condition that they return twice the quantity of seeds they borrowed. This is proposed to be scaled in tiers at the village and block levels. The seed bank distributes 122 varieties of 32 crops. Before the seed bank was established, farmers used to buy hybrid seeds, often on borrowed money. “If we use indigenous seeds and stop using chemical fertilizers, we can save almost Rs 5,000 a year,” the farmers told VillageSquare.in. Rahibai has applied for registration in Protection of Plant Varieties & Farmers’ Rights Authority, India (PPV & FRA) under Farmers’ Varieties. To promote the cause of conservation of landraces, she participates in programs such as the Indo-German Bilateral Co-operation in Seed Sector organized by PPV &FRA, besides local seed and agriculture fairs.

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Watch a video on Rahibai’s work. Read about her in Marathi on http://www.bytesofindia.com/Details/?NewsId=4959376736670856862