

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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In Memoriam: Simon Groot

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Another passing of a notable Dutchman (notable enough to have his obituary in *The Economist*): Simon Groot, founder of East-West Seeds—a major breeder and producer of vegetable seeds for the Asian, African and Latin American markets—passed away July 6 at the age of 90.

Born in 1934, Simon was part of the sixth generation of the famous Sluis & Groot breeding company founded in 1867 in Holland by his great-grandfather. Simon earned a degree in business economics from Erasmus University in Rotterdam and came into the family business in 1958 at his father's urging, where he became director of flower seed sales.

Traveling in Indonesia in the 1970s, Simon was struck by the poor quality of vegetable seeds, which led to low yield and persistent poverty among the farmers. Which is why, when the family sold Sluis & Groot in 1981, with his share of the proceeds he founded East-West Seeds (originally known as Hortigenetics Philippines) in the Philippines, partnering with seed trader Benito Domingo. The company aimed to develop and distribute high-quality vegetable seeds tailored for tropical climates. Their mantra was “You serve the farmer first.”

Their first breeding trials began in 1982, and in 1986, they introduced a bigger gourd variety called Jade Star, the first locally developed commercial vegetable hybrid in the Philippines and Southeast Asia. It was easier to grow, produced better yields and was resistant to downy mildew.

Over time, East-West grew to serve some 20 million small farmers in 80 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. They offer 600 varieties in 80 crops. Three of his four children have leadership roles within the company, with his son Ard serving as chairman since 2018.

Simon's influence and impact has been recognized with many awards over the years, the greatest of which being the World Food Prize in 2019, the highest honor in agriculture. **GT**