

Learning to Share: Community Seed Libraries as Seed Education Hubs

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Seed Libraries in British Columbia have grown from a tiny seed of an idea into small, regionally acknowledged seedlings. For the past three years the LifeCycles Project Society has been working with public institutions, seed producers, not-for-profit organizations, neighborhood gardening groups, and community volunteers to help nourish this growth. In partnership with the Greater Victoria Public Library, we are building community seed literacy while trying to understand our community seed library's role in narrating the story of locally grown, ecological seed.

Our Story

In the summer of 2013, LifeCycles began meeting with librarians and program staff at the Greater Victoria Public Library (GVPL) to discuss the idea of creating a seed library. Over the course of 4 monthly meetings, we digested research collected on seed libraries around the world and invited local seed savers and advocates to advise on the structure of a seed library program. In the fall of 2013, we hosted a "Seed Café" with about a dozen growers and twenty more engaged community members in roundtable discussions.

Our Seed Café confirmed that the local seed saving community was interested in supporting a Victoria Seed Library and provided valuable insight for the project's vision and key goals. At Victoria's Seedy Saturday in February of 2014, we launched the Victoria Seed Library in partnership with the GVPL as a way for hobby and beginner gardeners to share seeds and other gardening resources, and to connect with other seed savers. Our mission is to bolster local food security and steward our region's biodiversity, while promoting and increasing demand for regionally grown seed. We do this work through a framework of access- we provide membership, seeds, education, resources and equipment all free of charge. We attempt to increase access further by rotating the branches where seed lending days and workshops occur, and working with community groups and organizations that can connect their members to our seed saving resources.

Our Model

To gain access to the Victoria Seed Library's collection of seeds, people register to become members and attend a free 1.5 hour seed saving workshop. After the workshop, members can sign out seeds during the Victoria Seed Library's operating hours. A key difference of our library program is that rather than hosting a seed library in a card catalogue or piece of furniture permanently installed in the library, our seed library is "open" on set days, when volunteers set up a table with all of our seeds and a diversity of beginner guides and handouts on seed saving. Volunteers use our simple seed sign-out and sign-in online tracking systems to distribute seeds to members, and to receive seeds from anyone willing to share.

We decided to focus on providing and encouraging members to return only those seeds that are relatively self-pollinating though we do carry a few unique local cross-pollinating varieties from knowledgeable seed growers. In our attempts to deepen the local knowledge around the importance of regionally adapted seed, we carry only seed that is grown locally, and we do not accept donations of seed from afar. While this limits the volume of seed we receive as donations – by not reaching out to larger seed distribution companies- we are able to consistently bring the conversation back to regional adaptation and highlight local seed companies.

Our face-to-face seed library model, where members sign-in and sign-out seeds in person from oriented volunteers, has shown great educational benefits. When people sign-out seeds, they invariably have questions about what the plant will look like when it sets seeds, and how it should be cared for. When members return seed, we look closely at the seed they have returned and discuss best practices for ripening and harvesting seeds, discussing why seeds may look shriveled, discolored or inadequately dried. These brief interactions are powerful learning moments. Our face-to-face model also creates hundreds of conversations about seed saving. Many people walk by our seed table at the entrance to their public library, stop, and engage our volunteers in dialogue.

Table 1 – Pros and Cons of Face-to-Face versus traditional furniture style seed libraries

	Permanent Furniture System	Human Interaction System
Education	Difficult to teach people about seeds or discuss seed saving. Relies heavily on hand-outs and signage.	Easy to engage people in conversations about seeds and provide advice. Can also build sense of community.
Accessibility	Open regularly and easy to access seeds.	Not open as regularly - can be barrier to participation.
Coordination	Requires less time, but can be difficult to keep organized. Clear organizational systems are very important to keeping it organized.	Depending on how often the seed library is open, it can be a large time commitment. Easier to manage the seed collection and keep it organized.
Seed Quality	Can be difficult to keep track of seeds, get rid of old seed and ensure consistent quality. Clear organization and consistent management of collection are key.	Easier to track seed, keep it organized and ensure consistent quality.

In the Victoria Seed Library’s inaugural year, we focused on hosting workshops and regular learning events at various branches of the GVPL. These indoor workshops aimed to help educate community members about seed saving best practices, and

give context to the state of seed sovereignty locally and globally. We also gathered information about the seeds in our collection in a seed catalogue and reached out to dozens of community organizations to invite their participation. We trained volunteers and invited them to shape and co-create our evolving project. During our end of year evaluation, we surveyed members and interviewed key partners and confirmed our suspicions that learning inside a library about seed is perhaps not the best, and certainly not the only way, to learn about seed. We also heard our members desire to connect with others and share experiences. We reflected and felt that the project could do more to build relationships between people, and between people and seeds.

In the project's second year, we worked with the Surrey Libraries to create the Surrey Seed Library on the same model as Victoria. The main difference in Surrey was that membership only required a signed commitment to try to grow the seeds you receive and, if successful, to return some back to the seed library. Attendance at a seed saving workshop was not a prerequisite to membership, primarily because community members in Surrey identified this as too large a barrier to participation in their community seed library.

Sharing the Stories of Seed

Enabling easy sharing and long-term stewardship of a locally grown community seed bank is a secondary, long-term goal of LifeCycles' seed work. Our primary goal has always been to engage community members in conversations about the importance of local seed to the health of our food systems, environment and communities. We want to narrate the local stories of seed and create compelling communications that can help these stories reach a broad audience.

This desire has kept us working closely with local growers, purchasing and receiving donations of seed from the wisest seed people in our region and asking questions of how we can do more to support local seed production. Several local farmers are interested in participating in our education, and have been eager to support more hands-on learning in the field with our members. In our second year, we hosted several field days with local growers as well as purchased a winnower and seed screens, which we used to facilitate community seed cleaning days at local farms. We also continue to offer beginner seed saving workshops in various library branches and facilitate a diverse volunteer network, who run the seed libraries when they are open.

From the beginning, we have been reaching out to local, provincial and national seed saving organizations to solicit input and various forms of support. We have been significantly helped by the knowledge and mentorship from leaders within various organizations, including: The Seed and Plant Sanctuary of Canada, the BC EcoSeeds Co-op, the Bauta Family Initiative for Canadian Seed Security, Seeds of Diversity Canada, and the Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library. Individuals within these

organizations have provided invaluable seed knowledge and systems support in the evolving design and delivery of the Victoria and Surrey Seed Libraries.

We continue to reach out to elders, seed libraries and seed growers, in an effort to better hear the stories of seeds. In the spring of 2015 we travelled to Tucson Arizona to participate in the 1st International Seed Library Forum. We also presented on the potential of seed libraries at the British Columbia Library Association's annual conference. Both these conferences led to a new commitment to start building a network of seed libraries and promoting seed sharing across BC, and we are now participating in a loose network of international seed librarians working to develop an international seed library network. We continue to compile resources for community seed sharing on the website www.borrowssavesshare.com. Through this website, we have also started to offer a "Seed Library Starter Kit" with resources and seeds to help any community in BC start their own seed library.

Next Steps

In the coming year, we would like to co-design an evaluation plan to determine what outcomes community seed sharing initiatives are trying to achieve. As a first step, we want to know why different communities are working to support community seed saving, and what they're doing to support it. Ideally, we will then be able to identify and develop indicators to track and assess our progress and better understand the role and impact of community seed sharing in supporting a healthy, abundant local seed system.

Through our Borrow.Save.Share network, we will begin distributing a quarterly e-newsletter to seed sharing communities across BC. Appreciating the need to highlight a diversity of voices, we want to support community seed sharing as a microphone that can amplify a shared narrative. Community seed libraries can support diverse community voices in coming together to bring seeds back into the public cultural domain.

By clearly identifying why seed matters, and working with the region to craft a compelling and clear narrative about the importance of seed, we feel that we can support BC's seed growers in their marketing and public outreach in a meaningful way. We want to grow the market for locally grown seed and give local seed the same audience that local food has recently received. As our friend and farmer Robin Tunnicliffe says "Here in BC, seed saving is at the same place organic farming was 10 years ago. When you tell someone you're a seed farmer, no one knows what that means or why it's important." This is the story community seed libraries can help to tell.

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