A revolution is spreading across the nation as a grassroots effort to reclaim what has always been considered public domain: seeds. While Big Agriculture and its companies scramble to create and patent every seed they can, a different vision has been growing in the hearts of many. Our food system is under assault. The right to save a seed and grow it out again is threatened, and we will not stand for it. We will save seed and we will share seed, no matter what the multinational corporations say or whom they sue.

In the quiet buildings that have long housed our books, a new program is being explored. Take a good look around your nearest public library, and some of you may find something new. If you step into the Basalt Regional Library in Colorado’s Roaring Fork Valley, you’ll find seeds. These offerings are seeds to grow in your garden with the goal that you will save some seeds from your plants and return them for another community member to take out next season.

I’m an avid seed saver, and in early 2012, while doing some research online, I ran across the seed library idea. I was hooked and immediately presented the idea to our local library. The library director, Barbara Milnor, was onboard from the start! Over the course of the next few months, a great partnership was formed between the Central Rocky Mountain Permaculture Institute (CRMPI) and the Basalt Regional Library. We developed a program to allow equal access for every community member to open-pollinated seed to grow in their gardens. With the seed planted (pun intended), the vision took on new life; with the help of countless community partners and volunteers, we started our valley’s first seed library.

The Basalt Seed Lending Library opened this past January, with over 100 community members present for the event. The program was welcomed with eager arms, and patrons checked out 65 seed packets that very evening. The launch party was marked by great food, a raffle to support the program, a presentation, and even a small seed exchange to get things moving!

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One of the main goals of the Seed Library is to build up a collection of vegetables that are well adapted to the particular growing environment found in this area. With regular droughts and short growing seasons, the Roaring Fork Valley needs hardy, short-season vegetable varieties. Over time, our hope is to encourage the regional adaptation of a diverse mix of food crops to support our local gardeners in their goals of growing vegetables for their households.

In addition, there are many issues that put seed saving on the top of my list of important skills to maintain, one being the rapid loss of diversity in our food system. Over 75% of our vegetable seed varieties have been lost over the last 100 years according to a recent UN Food and Agriculture Organization study. With the changing climate and ever-evolving insects and diseases, a loss of diversity is a loss of resilience. In The Seed Underground, Janisse Ray puts it well, “Genetic freedom allows crops to evolve and adapt to disease, to a transforming Earth, and to macro- and microclimates.”

There are already over 50 seed libraries across the US, including a few that offer support to those looking to start their own libraries. A few great resources are the Richmond Grows Seed Library in Richmond, CA, and the Bay Area Seed Interchange Library (BASIL), which originated from the Berkeley-based Urban Ecology Center in 2000. We found their support invaluable in helping to spread this great program to new locations. Seed libraries not only preserve genetic diversity, but exercise our right freely to share and save seed, a liberty that is in danger of being lost if we do not take a stand and shout, “the seeds belong to us all.”

We received great press for this program: articles and radio spots that even included a few minutes on NPR’s “Morning Edition.” After the national story aired, emails and calls bombarded...
us with requests for information on how we started this and how other towns could start their own. As mentioned, there are great online resources, but to get you started, here are a few steps that we feel are critical to the creation, launch, and (hopefully) long term success of a seed library program.

Forging relationships

A great journey is best travelled with friends. Starting any program, especially a seed library, is not a one-man or one-woman show. We were thankful to have the support of an entire community, but at the beginning there were two parties. We feel that there must be a relationship created between a public library and an agricultural non-profit such as Central Rocky Mountain Permaculture Institute (CRMPI). The partnership is a match made in heaven for a community program such as this. Obviously, someone needs to know a thing or two about plants and about seeds, and that’s where the agricultural group comes in. While some seed libraries are not housed in an actual library, it is our opinion that a community program is best placed within a public institution. Besides that, we are rather fond of attaching the term “public” to “seed” as often as possible. The partnership we created allowed each partner to offer up skills to the program and to one another, such as the tireless data entry support of the lovely Gail Owens at the Basalt Regional Public Library. Our skills complement one another and create a cumulative effect that is greater than the sum of its parts.

We’re thrilled to partner with such a progressive and thoughtful group of leaders.

Priming the pump with donations

Unless your group already includes a large number of seed savers and thus has access to significant amounts of seed, seed is the first thing you’ll need. We contacted a number of seed companies that offered organic and open-pollinated seed to explain the program that we were creating. We were rewarded with high levels of support from companies like Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, Lake Valley Organics, Botanical Interests, Bounty Beyond Belief, and many other generous companies who provided the seeds required to get this program off the ground. In addition to seed donations, we visited area businesses to request donations for a raffle that would be held at the launch party. Again, we were met with open arms from businesses such as Indoor Garden Supply in Carbondale and the Vitamin Cottage in Glenwood Springs. In addition, other local environmental non-profits such as Sustainable Settings and Aspen Center for Environmental Sciences (ACES) provided items to raffle.

Community awareness

What good is a community program if the community doesn’t know that it exists? Not much, in our book. So we got the word out, big time! With the support of another local group, the Roaring Fork Food Policy Council, we drummed up dozens of volunteers who came out for multiple seed-sorting parties to get ready for opening day. Realizing that there were not many home-scale gardeners who would need either 100 tomato or 250 kale plants, we gathered the troops to divide, repackage, and label over 2,000 packets. Three sorting parties later, we had enough seed packets to open the library. In addition to stocking the program with seed, we worked to let the whole community know about the opportunity to check out seeds.

To celebrate the opening of the Basalt Seed Lending Library, we scheduled a launch party for this past January 23rd. We sent word to everyone we knew and contacted the local papers. Articles appeared in the Aspen Times and the Sopris Sun. The event was a huge success. With over 100 people in attendance, we introduced the what, why, and how of our new seed library. In addition, we had a potluck, a raffle, a tour of the new library program, and even a small seed swap for existing seed savers! Both the Aspen Public Radio station and Edible Aspen Magazine were there to help us celebrate and to offer continued press support.

And the seeds grow

The work and fun have only just begun! Starting a seed library is a great thing, but the real challenge will be to sustain community involvement and to encourage residents to gain further knowledge in seed saving. We feel that a necessary part of this program is to offer continuing education for those who would like to learn this valuable skill. So, we will be offering multiple seed-saving workshops each coming season. In addition, we’ve just received word that we have a new relationship forming and thus a new opportunity to support the Basalt Seed Lending Library and our growing community of seed savers. CRMPI and the Town of Basalt have joined hands to create the Basalt Community Seed Garden! The Town has graciously offered up Ponderosa Park for this purpose. CRMPI will grow out around a dozen heirloom varieties to save the seeds and return them to the library inventory. Not only will this allow CRMPI the space to grow a huge quantity of seed, but it will also highlight this essential feature of a local food system.

With the combination of the Basalt Seed Lending Library and the Basalt Community Seed Garden, in addition to other green practices, the Town of Basalt is stepping to the forefront in environmentally sustainable programs. We’re thrilled to partner with such a progressive and thoughtful group of leaders. If you’re passing through Colorado this summer, be sure to stop by!

We hope that this article inspires you to start a seed library in your area. If this has planted a “seed” in your head, join the growing social network at SeedLibrary.org. There are other great resources to be found at RichmondGrowsSeeds.org. Happy growing and saving!

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