

Not to buy but to borrow

Seed libraries aim to engage new gardeners, sustain supply

by Vern Faulkner

Patrons of the Fredericton Public Library with a valid library card can access an extensive supply of pesticide-free, non-genetically-modified seeds, at the grand cost of nothing. Now entering its third year, this seed lending program in the New Brunswick capital has grown. In 2015, 95 users checked out 412 packs of seeds. In 2016, 210 users made 1,652 seed checkouts from the downtown library, while an expanded service on the north side of Fredericton served 81 users.

"It's been really well received," says Julia Stewart, the library director.

A wooden index card box – a relic from the days before libraries indexed collections digitally – serves as the second-floor home for the seeds. Library patrons need only fill out an application form and present it at the reference desk to gain immediate access to the seeds available for lending, usually four to five packets per visit.

Both Stewart and Carole Muncer, garden director for NB Community Harvest Gardens (NBCHG), stress that those who take seeds are expected to return fresh seeds at the end of the year.

"The idea is that you're supposed to save your own seeds, for yourself, and return some to the library," says Muncer.

NBCHG is a non-profit group of volunteers who oversee community garden plots in Fredericton. The organization dedicated one plot to growing seeds in 2013, and launched an informal seed library the following year, operating out of a shoebox that volunteers took to workshops and events. It had some success, but also some shortfalls. "The shoebox moved with us, so it was never where somebody wanted to access it," recalls Muncer.

In time, as the library sought to partner with a suitable group, and the gardeners

learned of seed libraries operating in other jurisdictions, they made the connection.

"You want seeds that do well in our



Julia Stewart, director of the Fredericton Public Library, says the seed library program, offered in partnership with NB Community Harvest Gardens, has been "really well received." (Vern Faulkner photo)

location," Muncer says. "A good reason to save seeds and have libraries that are local is because over time they adapt."

The program also ties in with the concept of heirloom varieties – echoing a time when young sons or daughters of farming families received a wedding gift of seeds to help start their new farm.

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The bulk of the seeds available are intended as food items: staples such as beans, peas, carrots, kale, lettuce, and the like, though some seeds for flowers such as sunflowers and poppies are on hand.

The seed lending program is aimed

at new gardeners, and bolstered by workshops held in conjunction with the library, to provide some tips for those utterly new to the idea of growing their own produce.

Also vital are workshops on saving seed, so gardeners have the skills to collect seeds to give back to the library at the end of the year. Garden association volunteers then organize the seeds, and supplement them with readily available seed stock as needed, in advance of the following spring. The packages they make up generally contain five or so seeds, since a small gardener is likely to grow only three or so tomato plants, and a like number of peppers, for example.

One of the goals of the program is to become self-sufficient. Currently, some seeds are obtained from producers such as Hope Seeds, which creates a cost, though Muncer is quick to credit the Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security for a grant that helped expand the service.

As a librarian, Stewart sees seed lending as a logical extension of her work. "Our business is loaning things, and we know how to do that, to put trust in our patrons and do it for free," she says, adding that libraries are centres of

community knowledge and skills, and the seed program is "a spin on that."

"As we look at something librarians call community-led service, we're listening to our communities and are engaged with them," she says. "If there is something of interest, and it's booming, we want to be part of that."

According to Stewart, the program puts little burden on library staff, other than some time spent explaining the service and how to use it. She has presented her findings on the program to a conference of Maritime librarians, with hopes other libraries follow suit.

Stephanie Hughes, regional seed program organizer with ACORN (Atlantic



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Canadian Organic Regional Network), says a seed library is now underway, or soon to launch, in some 20 Maritime libraries. "The seed library movement is pretty robust in Eastern Canada," she says. "Our whole aim is to increase the resilience of local food systems."

Though much of the initial impetus came from farmers and seed producers, Hughes says the burgeoning local food movement has increased awareness about the role of seed as the foundation of food production, and the merits of seed adapted to local growing conditions.

Because seed libraries tend to attract beginner gardeners with little or no experience, such programs must educate users about things like soil fertility and

"Seed libraries have this momentum because people want to make their food as local as possible, which is growing it themselves" – Stephanie Hughes

seed saving, Hughes says. She cites the example of crossbreeding within the cucurbit family, which might throw the first-timer for a loop when a squash produces seed that grows something quite different in appearance from its parent.

Hughes advised anyone considering starting a seed library to think soberly about the labour requirements. However, she expects the concept will continue to gain popularity in the years to come.

"Seed libraries have this momentum," she says, "because people want to make their food as local as possible, which is growing it themselves."

And that's fine by Muncer. "I'm hoping that throughout New Brunswick and the Maritimes, seed libraries will continue to open," she says. "I want everybody, in five years, to be able to grow their own food."

(A long-time newspaper editor, writer, and photographer, Vern Faulkner has won multiple CCNA/ACNA awards for his work. He lives in New Brunswick.) ●