



Seed Libraries are Libraries

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Citation: Warth, Sophie. "Seed Libraries are Libraries." *Bridging Fields*, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2025).
<https://doi.org/10.33682/gvh9-19pn>.

Libraries have become a beacon of connection between an inexperienced consumer and learning to grow seeds as the seed library. I stress the importance of seed sovereignty and encourage everyone to engage with their local seed library. Through a literature review and a case study of the New York Public Library's own seed library program, I posit that seed libraries perfectly embody the ethos of library services: expanding access through equity and intellectual freedom, engaging in sustainable practices, and striving towards the public good.

An Introduction to Seed Libraries

Gardening is daunting work. We are so disconnected from our food system that by the time a can of beans gets to the consumer, they are perfectly packaged and preserved, leaving us with no connection to the beautiful seeds that got it there. The amount of water, sunlight, and tending needed to grow any seed, including beans, is mystifying! But growing a bean plant is easy when you have the right resources. Surprisingly, or maybe not as surprising to information professionals, libraries have become a beacon of connection between an inexperienced consumer and learning to grow seeds through the seed library. The seed library has grown in popularity and expanded into library information science literature in the last 10 years. Through a literature review and a case study of the New York Public Library's seed library program, I posit that seed libraries perfectly embody the ethos of library services: expanding access through equity and intellectual freedom, engaging in sustainable practices, and striving towards the public

good. I first explain what seed libraries are and why they matter. If you're here to learn *how* to actually use a seed library and what the experience is like, scroll down to the section titled NYPL: Seed Libraries in Action. For my readers curious about the nitty gritty behind a seed library, please read on!

What Are Seed Libraries?

Seed libraries operate in a similar function to a typical lending library. The seed library has a catalog of seeds, like a library has a catalog of books that patrons can "borrow." Rather than simply returning the seeds like a book, seed libraries typically teach their patrons to seed save, ensuring their continuity and survival. Seeds are returned at the end of the season, and saved in the seed library for the next patron. There is no guarantee that patrons will participate in seed saving, or do so properly, so there is a low return in comparison to traditional library materials. Some libraries, like the New York Public Library, do not ask their patrons to seed save/return seeds, likely for this reason. The ultimate strength of the seed library rests in its ability to cultivate community, similar to community gardens, educate, and expand access to resources or seeds. ^[1]

Why Do Seed Libraries Matter?

Seed libraries positively affect both the environment and community. I argue that communities are protected, created, and expanded by seed libraries.

Community

Seed libraries strengthen communities. Patrons learn about the process of growing certain plants, and what seed saving entails. Some seed libraries have included formal classroom workshops or informal pamphlets detailing how to care for your seed as it grows, and often include stories of the exact variety from past patron growers or Indigenous people's stories. ^[2] In addition to education, seed libraries also promote patron involvement in their community more broadly speaking. This both creates a micro-community of seed library users, and connects them through new knowledge to other gardeners or horticulturalists in the area. This not only supports community education, but also food security and civic engagement. ^[3]

Food Justice: civic engagement, food insecurity, and seed sovereignty

The food justice movement shows itself in efforts for food security and civic engagement through seed libraries. A renewed focus on localization of food systems has brought criticism of industrialized seed systems. The current threat of a loss of biodiversity due to climate change is only emphasized by the lack of biodiversity in our current seed system, controlled by corporations only seeking for more profit. ^[4] The food movement has responded with both nonprofit and public sector alternatives, but the seed library has emerged as a more localized alternative. Soleri concludes that seed libraries are a form of "socially-motivated community science" developed by "biological and social innovations reflecting their values and interests." ^[5] This recenters the patron and their wants, the exact goal of a traditional library. Lenstra & D'Arpa expand upon this notion

by analyzing community-based agriculture in public libraries: seed exchanges, gardening classes, and community gardens at libraries.^[6] They found that while some libraries began these community agricultural practices to thwart food insecurity, others were motivated by wanting to educate their patrons and develop their knowledge commons. Lenstra and D'Arpa^[7] then connect Soleri^[8] and Peekhaus'^[9] conclusions that seed libraries are "forms of community engagement and community service that connect back to the library's role in circulating things that positively impact community health."^[10]

Importantly, the seed library fosters seed sovereignty, connected to the food justice movement but with its own goals and support. Peschard and Randeria define seed sovereignty's goal as to "reclaim seeds and biodiversity as public goods and as commons, and defend the right of local communities to autonomously control how seeds are (re)produced, saved and circulated."^[11] Indigenous communities are essential to seed sovereignty. Below, I discuss the importance of repatriation for seed libraries for Indigenous communities. It is important to remember that "food sovereignty is not possible without seed sovereignty: seeds are essential to the revitalization of indigenous landscapes, plants, and foodways."^[12] Seeds in seed libraries can provide the beginnings of seed sovereignty to Indigenous communities by housing their tribe's seed/seed saving for the tribe, sharing their knowledge and stories of the seeds, and prioritizing the needs of Indigenous communities within the seed library and broader seed sovereignty movement. Seed sovereignty betters the entire community at large, and having a seed library in your community does so by improving our biodiversity, preserving Indigenous traditions, and encouraging food self reliance.

Expanding the Knowledge Commons

While seed libraries do foster a horticultural education, this intersects with a cultural education. Many seed libraries emphasize Indigenous stories and practices, and some only carry native seeds. Embree & Gilman refers to the relevance of repatriation for seed libraries.^[13] Repatriation means the returning of the earth to nature for the purpose of healing. Seed libraries have their origin in Indigenous practices, and repatriation reunites Indigenous peoples and practices with their land and culture. This largely refers to the practice of seed saving and creating seed libraries with and for Indigenous peoples to protect their culture, which is so tied to certain Indigenous crops. Marginalized groups of today were forced away from traditional forms of subsistence, such as collective seed ownership, because of the current industrialized food system based on foundations of colonialism.^[14] Seed libraries aim to integrate the traditional practices of seed saving and food sovereignty into their communities, thereby uplifting marginalized groups involved.

In terms of the environment, seed libraries increase biodiversity and protect from the threats of climate change. As previously mentioned, the industrial food system lacks biodiversity, which leaves it vulnerable to disease, pests, and climate change. Seed libraries cannot dismantle or change this system on their own merit, but can preserve and foster biodiversity on a micro and local level.^[15] Seed libraries directly respond to food insecurity and genetic erosion.^[16] This comes from increasing biodiversity by preserving a larger variety of seeds. When biodiversity dips, not only is our monoculture

food system vulnerable to disease and pests, but we lose out on important historical, nutritional, and cultural varieties. This in turn means seed libraries protect against climate change by preserving native and heirloom varieties that thrive in specific microclimates; something pertinent to our futures as the climates of every geography begins to shift.^[17]

NYPL: Seed Library in Action

NYPL has their own seed library program at their main circulating branch, Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library (SNFL). As a graduate student at New York University and a Library Page at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building (SASB), I chose this seed library among the many options in New York City because of its central location, relevance to my current understanding of NYC libraries, and the large number of visitors to this branch.

Any patron over the age of 18 who has a library card can check out up to three seed packets in one visit at the first floor information desk. These seeds are “non-GMO, heirloom, and/or organic seeds for patrons to grow vegetables, flowers, or herbs” and come with information on how to get started.^[18] The library recommends checking out books related to the topic from SNFL, or speaking to a librarian at the same desk with your questions. This is the aspect of NYPL’s seed library that I want to learn more about.

Rather than talk to the creator of the NYPL seed library, Susan Shi, or its current director Emily Wejchat as journalist Max Sano did in his article on the program in 2018, I aim to learn about the experience of the seed library from the perspective of an inexperienced patron. I visited SNFL on April 22, 2025 before my shift at SASB. Early in the morning, the first floor of the library is quiet and peaceful. Not many tourists or patrons have made it out to this branch yet, and librarians move about the floor freely. I headed to the information desk at the end of the long red carpet as indicated on their website, and asked the librarian for help checking out seeds from their seed library. The librarian pointed me to a QR code that included both [this Google Doc titled Seed Library Menu 2025](#) and a link to their [Seed Library 2025 Request Form Google form](#) to request seeds.

The Seed Library Menu 2025 includes a list of beginner friendly seeds, all subject to availability. They are organized by flowers, herbs, and vegetables. Then, they are further divided by container gardens, backyard spaces/community gardens, indoor under lights/sunny windowsill, and family friendly/beginner. This organization begins the information process of the seed library before a patron has even checked out their seeds yet.

After reviewing the available seeds, I filled out the Seed Library 2025 Request Form and found that their actual availability was quite different from the Seed Library Menu 2025. Although their seed availability was not equivalent on both documents, the request form had details on how many seeds a patron would receive, the opportunity to ask a question/leave a comment, which seeds you would request again, and which seeds you would like to see. Collecting this information was clearly for those behind the scenes running the program and restocking the seeds as the librarian did not ask to see my

library card or the submitted form when I returned to the desk. I verbally told her the three seed varieties I had requested, and she gave me the three packets: poppy seeds, brandywine tomatoes, and parsley. The seeds are kept alphabetically behind the desk in bins that hold all the packets. The packets look like the ones below, and have a great deal of information in the sticker. This once again starts the reference interaction of a seed library without the personal action of a librarian. By providing readily available information when a patron first receives the seed, the library is setting them up for success and confidence going forward in their information needs.

The process was quick and efficient, but did not give much opportunity for the patron to ask questions as they received their seeds. The librarians are not seed experts, and directed me towards the same resources available on the NYPL website, and recommended I browse the catalog for gardening books. Additional resources are available on the NYPL website under “A Greener World: Visit the Seed Library at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library,” with links to various NYC gardening organizations from the New York Botanical Garden to GrowNYC.^[19] Being able to ask questions is the center of a good reference experience for a patron. I was disappointed by the rushed nature of the interaction, but understand this branch is one of the busiest ones at NYPL. As they have to cater to such a diverse population, keeping this process streamlined ensures that more patrons can access these seeds. However, the QR code is inaccessible for certain patrons. Additionally, a beginner gardener may need more than a small sticker on their seed packet. Even in the internet age, a new skill like gardening can be better equipped for an in person reference interaction. Although seed libraries are not examples of traditional reference services, they are exemplars of expanding access.

NYPL Seed Library and ALA Core Values

Although checking out seeds from NYPL is not a perfect scenario for an inexperienced garden or library patron, they have multiple resource formats available to answer any questions. Providing included written material, the availability of books at the library, and online resources expands NYPL’s accessibility of this program. Multiple formats increases equity, so each patron has the option best suited to their needs. Hopefully this reduces any worries a patron may have being an inexperienced gardener.

The core values of librarianship by the American Library Association (ALA - I know, another acronym, libraries are full of them!) are access, equity, intellectual freedom and privacy, public good, and sustainability. Seed libraries provide access to information otherwise difficult to find. Buying seeds inherently creates a primary barrier, added to by the personal cost of teaching yourself a new skill unsupported. Seed libraries remove the financial barrier and provide the exact support needed.

Sharing information creates intellectual freedom, giving people the opportunity to cultivate their curiosity – pun intended. Each core value builds on one another, and these first two lend to equity. Removing financial barriers, expanding access, and removing biases are all ways seed libraries develop equity. Seed libraries add to public good, which is “working to improve society and protect the rights to education, literacy, and intellectual freedom.”^[20] They do so by protecting and preserving the educational and informational materials needed to grow your own food and maintain personal and

community seed sovereignty. Lastly, seed libraries are of course an example of sustainability. Self-reliant foodways move away from the globalized food system I first referenced, that unfortunately relies on unethical labor practices and damages our environment. Seed libraries adherence to ALA librarianship core values proves one thing: seed libraries *are* libraries, all the way to their core.

At the time of writing this, NYPL has two exemplary events on the docket related to the ethos of their seed library. One is a Spring Into Gardening: Seed Planting event at the Fort Washington Library on April 17, 2025 from 2-3:30pm. This nature workshop teaches patrons about seed planting, gives them the opportunity to plant their own garden, and discuss nature more broadly. Another is a Plant Swap/Seed Share that happens every last Monday of the month from 4-5pm at the New Amsterdam Library. They encourage patrons to bring plants, cuttings, or seeds to exchange but do not require them to participate. This is scheduled to happen each month until July, and hopefully will be continued through the summer. Like many libraries across the country, NYPL has expanded their scope of how to provide for its patrons. Events like these in addition to their seed library only strengthens the seed sovereignty of its patrons, thereby strengthening its dedication to the ALA Core Values that guide all libraries and librarians.

What Now?

Get out there! If you are in the NYC area, go check out the NYPL Seed Library. These programs only stay alive if there is enough participation to justify funding. Your participation ensures the continuity of this program for the next person who wants to learn how to grow basil from seed. If you check out seeds from NYPL, share them on social media, spread the word. Get a library card, bring your friends, and have a planting party! Attend events hosted by your local library whether it is in NYC or not. Seed sovereignty starts with you, but only if you take advantage of the amazing institution that is your public library.

[1] Embree, J. K., & Gilman, N. V. (2024). *The Story of the Modern Seed Library*.

[2] Peekhaus, W. (2018). "Seed Libraries: Sowing the Seeds for Community and Public Library Resilience." *The Library Quarterly* (Chicago), 88(3), 271–285. <https://doi.org/10.1086/697706>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Soleri, D. (2018). "Civic seeds: new institutions for seed systems and communities—a 2016 survey of California seed libraries." *Agriculture and Human Values*, 35(2), 331–347. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-017-9826-4>

[5] Ibid., 331.

[6] Lenstra, N., & D'Arpa, C. (2019). "Food Justice in the Public Library: Information, Resources, and Meals." *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion*, 3(4), 45–67. <https://doi.org/10.33137/ijidi.v3i4.33010>

[7] Ibid.

[8] Soleri, D. (2018). "Civic seeds: new institutions for seed systems and communities—a 2016 survey of California seed libraries." *Agriculture and Human Values*, 35(2), 331–347. <https://doi.org/10.1007/>

[s10460-017-9826-4](#)

- [9] Peekhaus, W. (2018). "Seed Libraries: Sowing the Seeds for Community and Public Library Resilience." *The Library Quarterly* (Chicago), 88(3), 271–285. <https://doi.org/10.1086/697706>
- [10] Ibid., 57.
- [11] Peschard, K., & Randeria, S. (2019). "JPS special forum on seed activism: an overview of the issues." *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1–3. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.1080/03066150.2019.1578752>
- [12] Hill, C. G. (2017). "Seeds as ancestors, seeds as archives: Seed sovereignty and the politics of repatriation to native peoples." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 41(3), 93–112
- [13] Embree, J. K., & Gilman, N. V. (2024). *The Story of the Modern Seed Library*.
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- [15] Ingalls, D. (2017). "Breaking New Ground: The Case for Seed Libraries in the Academic Library." *Public Services Quarterly*, 13(2), 78–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2017.1304315>
- [16] Campbell, B. C., & Veteto, J. R. (2015). "Free seeds and food sovereignty: anthropology and grassroots agrobiodiversity conservation strategies in the US South." *Journal of Political Ecology*, 22(1), 445–465. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v22i1.21118>
- [17] Embree, J. K., & Gilman, N. V. (2024). *The Story of the Modern Seed Library*.
- [18] Shi, S. (2022, June 6). "A Greener World: Visit the Seed Library at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library." *The New York Public Library*. <https://live-legacy-admin.nypl.org/blog/2019/04/26/introducing-mid-manhattan-seed-library>
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] ALA. (2024, January). "Core values of librarianship." *American Library Association*. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>

Author Bio:

Sophie Warth is a current graduate student at NYU and LIU pursuing degrees in Food Studies and Library Information Science. Her undergraduate research on the first meal had upon release from incarceration builds on her interest in the food identities of marginalized populations. At the intersection of her two degrees is a dedication to information accessibility and a passion for food culture.

REFERENCE DESK REFLECTIONS