Breaking New Ground: The Case for Seed Libraries in the Academic Library

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Breaking New Ground: The Case for Seed Libraries in the Academic Library

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Seed libraries are a relatively new innovation in the library field, offering seeds, gardening information, and the opportunity for community and ecological engagement to members. While they are increasingly popular in public libraries, they have not yet established a foothold in academic libraries. This paper defines the nature and role of seed libraries, the current state of seed libraries in North American universities, and offers recommendations for the establishment of seed libraries in academic libraries.

KEYWORDS academic libraries, public services, outreach, seed libraries

INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the Internet age, libraries, especially public libraries, have faced something of an image problem. Although libraries and their librarians have always managed to change with the times and adapt to meet the needs of their users, the public assumed that libraries must be experiencing an existential crisis. Media outlets and bloggers offered numerous think pieces bemoaning the inevitable demise of the library (Bodnick, 2012; Brodsky, 2013; Siegler, 2013) or somewhat more optimistically speculating on how the library might claw its way into 21st-century relevancy (Agresta, 2014; Kohlstedt, 2016). Although the former type of article can be attributed to simple ignorance on the part of the authors, the latter category is notable for two things: the almost exclusive focus on the public library, with little to no mention of academic libraries, and the inclusion of the innovative trend...
sometimes termed “libraries of things” (Kohlstedt, 2016). While it is not surprising that the public would focus on public libraries, it is also due to the difference in innovation styles between public and academic libraries. Both public and academic libraries have responded to the fast-changing information atmosphere, but while academic librarians have periodically felt the need to respond to the media alarmism about the imminent collapse of the library (Riggs, 2001), we have not channeled our innovative energies into some of the more unusual, community-oriented programs embraced by our colleagues in public libraries. It is my belief that academic libraries and their users could benefit in a variety of ways by the creation of such programs. This paper will focus on one in particular: the seed library.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Virtually no academic work has been done on the subject of seed libraries, most likely because the concept is quite new. The first seed library was founded in 2000 in a California ecological center and it took a few years more for seed libraries to start springing up in public libraries (Conner, 2014). As of this writing, they are almost non-existent in academic libraries, with only three in Canada and seven in the United States (see Appendix for the full list). Academic librarians and library researchers have not yet, it seems, turned their attention to this emerging phenomenon; most writings about seed libraries currently come from news magazines, a few online seed library networks, and a few glancing mentions in larger articles. In order for academic work to begin on this topic, attention must be called to it, and by setting out the case for the creation of seed libraries in an academic context, I hope to do so.

DEFINING THE SEED LIBRARY

First, it is important to define “seed library,” and to distinguish it from its relative the seed bank, for which it is often mistaken. A seed library is a collection of seeds (usually vegetable, fruit and flower seeds) from which users can “borrow” seeds, take them home and grow them. At the end of the growing season, the user will harvest seeds from a few of the plants and return them to the seed library to maintain the collection. Seed libraries are usually maintained as a collection of a larger institution. This institution is often a library, but seed libraries can also be found as part of agricultural extension stations, schools, student clubs, community gardens, or other community centers (Conner, 2014). Nearly always (especially in the case of those in libraries), they are free; no fee is required to make use of a seed library, although most do require that users sign up in one form or another, making seed library use easier to track.
WHY DO WE NEED SEED LIBRARIES?

But why do we need seed libraries, and why do they belong in a library? These are good questions, and fortunately there are many good answers. One very important reason is that seed libraries can be extremely effective in community-building (Conner, 2014). Seed library promotion provides an excellent catalyst for hosting community events: seed-saving workshops in the fall, seed-starting workshops in the spring, a talk from a local farm about composting or organic pest management in the summer. These types of events are effective at raising the profile of both the seed library and the larger institution that houses it, and for bringing different members of the community together. It also offers new educational opportunities for users, expanding the library’s ability to disseminate different and expanded types of knowledge (Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library, 2016). This sort of program epitomizes the new, innovative channels being created by librarians to improve their service, and to demonstrate that libraries are as useful and relevant as ever, just in new ways.

But simple user services are not the only reason for seed libraries. They can also serve a larger ecological purpose. Modern agriculture relies heavily on only a relative few varieties of food plants which are optimized for large-scale growing, but this reliance on only a few types of seed has led to a lack of biodiversity in agriculture, and the dwindling or loss of many types of food plants (Conner, 2014). This lack of genetic diversity may leave our food crops open to devastation by disease or pests, as occurred during in the Great Famine in Ireland in the 19th century, or the decimation of the banana-growing industry in much of Central America in the 1950's (Pollan, 2006). While seed libraries cannot effect a large change on the agriculture industry as a whole, they can work to preserve biodiversity on a micro level. Seed libraries can and should hold as wide a variety of seeds as they can manage, and when creating the initial collections librarians may choose to focus on rare or “heirloom” seed varieties, which are not generally grown by large commercial agricultural enterprises (Conner, 2014).

Seed libraries also create a vector for disseminating yet another type of knowledge, that of local plant-growing. The types of flowers and food plants that can be grown varies wildly by growing region, and this sort of information is very often held in the minds of local growers, rather than in a book or on a website (The Seed Library Social Network, 2016). Involving people who have that local knowledge in the seed library program not only contributes to the community-building aspect discussed earlier, but effectively adds their knowledge to the library’s collection, benefitting other users. It is of course beneficial to have more traditional resources, such as gardening books, as part of the seed library collection as well, but the opportunity to preserve and spread local knowledge makes the collection more unique and more useful to the user.
There is also the access factor. Just as libraries have historically provided books (and later, computers) to people who might not otherwise be able to access them, often for financial reasons, the seed library provides access to seeds (Conner, 2014; Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library, 2016). People who might not be able to afford to buy seeds to start a small garden will be given the opportunity to do so at no cost, and people who might simply not have considered growing a few tomatoes and pumpkins out in their yards might be inspired to start. Incentivizing local food production may not seem like a normal library function, but it is of benefit to the community for ecological and social reasons, just as providing books and other sources of knowledge is also beneficial to the community (Landgraf, 2015). Backyard gardens do not create the same types of environmental damage that large-scale agriculture does, and growing food can be educational for both children and adults, who may not have previously much considered where their food came from. This circles back to the library’s place in the community, as not only a book and computer repository, but also a place for people to gather, learn, take knowledge home and apply it. The seed library has the capacity to do that very effectively.

SEED LIBRARIES IN THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

So, we return to seed library in the context of an academic library. For reasons that are not clear, seed libraries, which have made major inroads into the public sphere, are very few in academic libraries. Two currently exist in Canadian universities (one at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, and another at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in British Columbia), with another set to launch in spring 2017 at McGill University in Quebec. In the United States, there are only a few more, with seven seed libraries in academic libraries scattered across the country from California to Alabama to Massachusetts. More exist as part of university agricultural extension programs or campus student groups, but these are not run by or housed in the university library and may in fact be affiliated with a local public library or community group, rather than the university library.

A strong argument for the place of seed libraries in an academic context is the parallels that can be drawn between seed libraries and other innovative services in academic libraries. Academic libraries are increasingly viewed by librarians as beyond simply places for research (Seeholzer, 2011), and although students have not yet quite caught on to this new paradigm (Karle, 2008), many university libraries now offer services which may not be directly connected to an academic mandate, but are designed to aid students’ health and well-being. For example, many libraries have created programs to bring in therapy dogs to relieve student stress during finals (Jalongo & McDevitt, 2015; Lannon & Harrison, 2015; Reynolds & Rabschutz, 2011). These
programs are based on a large body of literature suggesting that interaction with animals relieves stress in humans “whether by increasing immunity levels … lowering systolic blood pressure … or facilitating social interaction” (Lannon & Harrison, 2015). At other universities, stationary bikes equipped with laptops are being set up in campus libraries to allow students to continue to study while at the same time getting some stress-reducing exercise (Chant, 2013; Logue, 2015; Shaffer, 2016). Seed libraries can serve a similar purpose in an academic library. A wealth of studies suggest that gardening and caring for plants can serve to alleviate stress in children, adolescents, and adults (Catanzaro & Ekanem, 2004; Chawla, Keena, Pevec, & Stanley, 2014; Mattson, 2010; Sahlin, Ahlborg, Matuszczyk, & Grahn, 2014). The seed library, by offering seeds and gardening resources at no cost (perfect for the notoriously cash-strapped student population), provides another way for academic libraries to help students maintain their mental health while at university.

Seed libraries also offer the opportunity to benefit the university in a variety of ways. Student groups may be interested in participating, especially if gardening, agriculture, ecology or environmental protection student organizations exist on campus. These students may have some expertise or knowledge to bring to the table, and seed library events such as seed-saving workshops or gardening workshops can serve as a way for these students to share their knowledge with their fellow students and with other members of the university community. At Wells College in New York, the seed library has provided seed to student groups for student activities, and to the university grounds department, which used the seed for campus beautification projects (M. Brown, personal communication, December 13, 2016). The seed library at Georgia Southern University provides seed to and receives saved seed from the student vegetable garden (F. Smith, personal communication, December 16, 2016), which provides fresh vegetables to the campus community. Such partnerships demonstrate the great potential for a university seed library to help improve the campus and to engage with the campus community in new, unique ways.

Several academic seed libraries have also made a practice of reaching out to the wider community, and have seen positive results for both the seed library and the community. Jolene Reid, the founder of Dalhousie University’s seed library, has focused considerable attention on this type of community outreach, and has found that such outreach has “… proven to be incredibly valuable in promoting not just our seed saving resources but our collection as a whole and demonstrates to our region what a valuable resource they have in our collection” (personal communication, December 13, 2016). Wells College has established partnerships with local community gardening clubs, local farmers and growers, and charitable organizations. These organizations benefit from access to seed, the community (both students and others) get the benefit of the produce grown from the seed, which
is made available at farmer’s markets in the area (M. Brown, personal communication, December 13, 2016). This type of larger community engagement is beneficial to both members of the community, who may be given access to information or resources they did not previously have, to the students, who are given opportunities to engage outside the university bubble, and to the library, who by facilitating this exchange raises its profile in the community.

Although most of the reasons thus far discussed have focused on community engagement, a seed library in an academic context can serve an academic purpose as well. Many universities have a Faculty of Environmental Studies, or a School of Agriculture, or a Department of Botany, or another department or school in the fields of science that touch on plant-growing, food production, or ecology. As discussed in an earlier section, seed libraries were born partly from a desire to benefit the environment and promote knowledge about local food production. These topics, viewed from an academic perspective, mesh perfectly with the mission of a seed library in an academic library. The seed library could serve as a sort of hands-on partner to certain departments, offering new types of resources to support learning and research. At Wells College, the seed library provides seeds which are used in the Introduction to Gardening courses (M. Brown, personal communication, December 13, 2016). The seed library may also be able to bolster its position on local food production and ecological benefits by holding talks or round-table discussions in which professors are invited to speak on topics related to environmentally-friendly agriculture, the impact of community gardening, nutrition and local food production, or any other of a multitude of topics. However, as Jolene Reid notes, the seed library must take care not to take a moral or political position that could be seen as working counter to research being conducted in the university faculties (personal communication, December 13, 2016), such as research on genetic modification or work in partnership with large agricultural interests. This type of quasi-political stance could lead to conflict and could threaten the seed library’s functioning and continued existence.

HOW TO ESTABLISH A SEED LIBRARY

If all of this has inspired you to consider creating a seed library, there are many practical aspects to consider, starting with legality. Librarians must be aware of potential legal issues surrounding production and exchange, which can affect seed libraries. In Canada, the law is clear and applies nationwide: seed libraries, since they do not sell seeds, are free to operate, providing that certain types of seed, such as oil-seeds and grains, are not included in the collection (Seeds Act, 1985; Seeds of Diversity, 2014). Librarians must ensure that they comply with laws pertaining to the types of seed permitted by carefully vetting any seeds donated (J. Reid, personal communication,
December 13, 2016). In the United States, things get murkier. The laws governing seed production and distribution vary from state to state, and how they apply to seed libraries is not always clear from the statute (Seeds of Diversity, 2014). For this reason, it is recommended that anyone wishing to start a seed library in the United States contact their state Department of Agriculture (Landgraf, 2015) to receive clear information on state laws as they pertain to seed libraries.

Barring any legal issues, those wishing to start a seed library must also consider funding. Fortunately, it is possible to create a functioning seed library with very little money (Conner, 2014; J. Reid, personal communication, December 13, 2016). The most vital part, the seeds, can often be obtained by donation. Many seed companies, especially those that focus on organic and/or heirloom seeds, are willing to donate unsold seed at the end of the growing season. These donations can be quite substantial. Marian Brown, director of the Center for Sustainability and the Environment at Wells College, calculates that they received donations worth $3500 in 2016, and over $4000 in 2017 (personal communication, January 20, 2017). Local farms, the horticultural department of the university, or university or student-run garden clubs can also be good sources of free seed; Georgia Southern University began their seed collection with donations from their student garden group (F. Smith, personal communication, December 16, 2016). There are also seed-exchange networks, most of which are highly localized, but there are a few large national networks such as Seeds of Diversity in Canada and Seed Savers Exchange in the United States, which can be great places to find rare varieties (Conner, 2014; M. Walsh, personal communication, December 13, 2016). It should be noted, however, that seeds donated by companies geographically distant from the seed library may not be suitable for the collection. A tomato variety that grows well in the long, warm growing season in central California may not thrive in the shorter, cooler growing season in, say, New England. Librarians should be aware of the growing climate of their region and keep it in mind when curating the seed collection (M. Walsh, personal communication, December 13, 2016).

A storage and organizational system must also be established. Our old friends the card catalogues have found a new life as part of seed library organization. As luck would have it, the drawers of the classic card catalogue cabinet are the perfect size for a standard seed packet, and since many libraries still have card catalogue cabinets gathering dust in some dark corner of a storage room, it is a cheap and convenient solution to the problem of where to put the seed collection. Libraries that no longer have such cabinets may use a variety of other storage schemes, from IKEA cabinets to simple plastic bins. There must also be a system for organizing the seeds, and there are several methods to choose from. The most obvious system seems to be alphabetical by name of seed (Arugula–Zinnia perhaps) and is easy for any user to grasp, requiring no knowledge of horticulture or organization codes.
Other systems, while slightly more complicated, can also help users find the right seeds for them. On the simpler, more user-friendly end, systems involve first separating the seeds into categories by type of seed (“Vegetables, Fruit, Flowers”) and then organizing alphabetically within those categories, or organizing seeds by ease of growing (“Easy, Moderate, Advanced”) (Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library, 2016; The Seed Library Social Network, 2016). A more complicated and potentially less user-friendly version of the latter system offered by Cindy Conner in her book “Seed Libraries” (2014) suggests organizing seeds by botanical names. There are excellent reasons for this system; for instance, a single variety of plant may have several different common names used both by gardeners and seed companies, so using its proper botanical name avoids confusion as to what, exactly, a particular seed will grow into. It is also important that anyone intending to save seeds have a basic understanding of cross-pollination potential between species, so as to avoid accidental crossing of, say, a zucchini and a pattypan squash and thus the production of hybrid seeds unsuitable for returning to the seed library. Organizing seeds by species may encourage gardeners to plant different species separately, which would lessen the risk of hybridization. This system may be suitable for an academic library, especially if the library chooses to emphasize its academic aspects. As always, it is important to take the needs and preferences of the users into account when choosing an organization system.

The check-out procedures for a seed library can also vary widely. They can be nearly identical to those for borrowing any other library item, and the collection records are sometimes integrated with the library catalogue (Pima County Public Library, 2016), but they are more commonly organized in an older style, using notebooks and paper check-out slips (Conner, 2014), which may be a more workable option if a library’s catalogue system does not allow for significant customization. Given the propensity of academic libraries for using enormous networked catalogue systems such as WorldCat, integrating the seed collection into the catalogue may not be as feasible a system as it might be for a public library with a more self-contained catalogue. A more labor-intensive but interesting solution to this issue is used at Dalhousie’s seed library: the library worked with the Faculty of Computer Science and the university chapter of Science without Borders to design an OPAC specifically for cataloguing seeds (J. Reid, personal communication, December 13, 2016). This type of system allows for easy access for the users and a good system of tracking for librarians.

Seed libraries are very often self-serve, allowing patrons to select their seeds and take them from the library at their leisure, taking either entire packets or selecting the desired number of seeds from the collection and organizing them in library-provided borrowing packets (The Seed Library Social Network, 2016). This is a much lower-maintenance system in that it creates less work for library staff, but it does require that users be educated
on the system at the outset. Other libraries choose to apply standard borrowing procedures to seeds, affixing barcodes to packets and using the computerized system to check out just as they would any other item. This system can work very well, and can streamline borrowing and returning, although the outlay of labor initially is much greater. It also has the advantage of allowing the library to keep borrowing statistics. The former system was chosen by Kwantlen Polytechnic University for its simplicity (C. Brinkerhoff, personal communication, December 14, 2016), while the former is used at Adams State University, where the ability to track borrowing is used to inform seed collection decisions (M. Walsh, personal communication, December 13, 2016). Choosing a borrowing system is very much at the discretion of the person or people responsible for the library, and the resources at their disposal.

Caring for and maintaining a seed library takes a certain amount of knowledge on the part of the librarian maintaining it. It is not enough to simply offer seeds, the responsible librarian must have some knowledge of how to assess seeds to ensure, to the best of his or her ability, that they are viable and correctly labeled. If too many patrons find themselves borrowing seeds that fail to germinate, or grow into a jalapeño plant when the packet was labeled as a sweet pepper, the seed library will have failed in its basic function. When accepting “returned” seeds from patrons, librarians will need to gather information on the seeds (this can be accomplished by asking returners to fill out a form). For extra verification, the librarian should also, if possible, identify the seeds using gardening reference sources, and perform a germination test (Conner, 2014) before integrating the new seeds into the collection. Seeds must also be kept free of moisture to keep them from molding or germinating prematurely, and should be protected from freezing. Most seeds are fairly hardy, and as long as they are stored within the library or other climate-controlled building, viability should be easy to maintain. Seeds remain viable for several years (Savonen, 2003; Winch, 2006), but regular weeding (so to speak) of the seed collection should be done in order to maintain a collection that will reliably grow.

If one is able to find some extra funds, there are many things that can be purchased to flesh out the seed library collection: books, for instance. Resources on seed-saving, gardening, composting, and pest and disease management are an important part of a successful seed library, since the seed library must provide informational support to their users. There is of course no shortage of online resources for gardeners, but if funds are available, a solid collection of gardening books plays a great supporting role in the seed library. When building a collection to support the seed library, the librarian must take into account such factors as the local climate (a book about gardening in the US may not be useful to a seed library in Canada) and the garden space available to the users (a seed library based in a city may want to emphasize resources on container and small-space gardening, rather than books aimed at country gardeners who have acres at their disposal).
Additionally, the library may choose to offer other resources such as seed-starting pots or gardening tools such as trowels for borrowing, but providing such items is not common in seed libraries.

CONCLUSION

This is an exciting time in library outreach, with many university libraries expanding their offerings beyond the purely academic and reaching out to students with inspiring and fun new programs and resources. As academic librarians, we can enrich the library and the university as a whole with such programs and collections, contributing to students’ wellbeing and expanded education. We also have the potential to significantly alter perceptions and expectations of academic libraries in the minds of students and faculty. If we as academic librarians wish to transform our libraries into places that offer not only solid and diverse scholarly resources and support but also a comfortable haven, a place to engage with the university community, and the opportunity to learn new, fun, unexpected skills and information, we must embrace innovative programs. Seed libraries are a perfect mix of all these factors, and as such present the ideal program for academic libraries looking for new ways to engage, excite, and enrich their users.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX I

Seed libraries in university libraries in Canada and the United States

Canada

- Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia (http://seedlending.library.dal.ca/)
- Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Surry, British Columbia (http://libguides.kpu.ca/seeds)
- McGill University, Montreal, Quebec

United States

- Adams State University, Alamosa, Colorado (http://www.adams.edu/library/resources/seedlibrary.php)
- Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama (http://wp.auburn.edu/sustainability/tag/seed-library/)
- Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, Georgia (http://library.georgiasouthern.edu/seeds/)
- Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts (http://libguides.hampshire.edu/seedlendinglibrary)
- Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana (https://libraries.indiana.edu/wylie-house-launches-seed-library-program)
- University of San Francisco, San Francisco, California (https://www.usfca.edu/library/seedlibrary)
- Wells College, Aurora, New York (https://www.wells.edu/library/find-resources/whats-new-library)