

# SEED LIBRARY SUSTAINABILITY

Innovative Ideas  
& Successful Strategies

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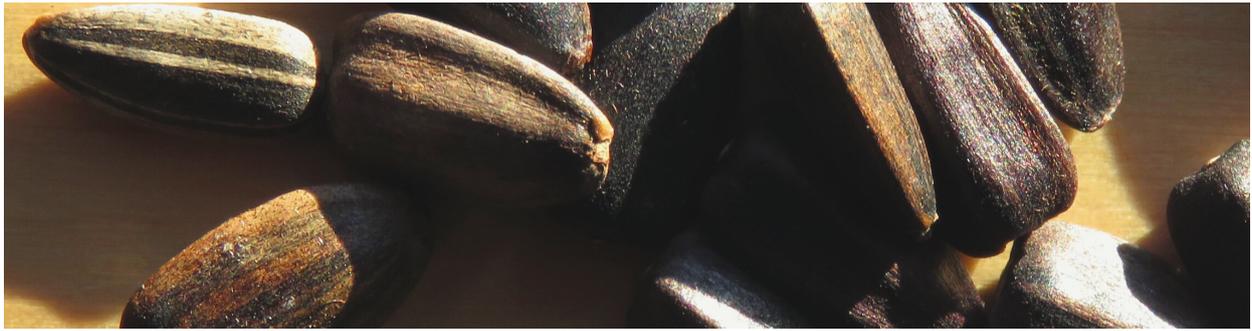


Glass gem popcorn saved by a small farmer in Michigan.

## THE GROWING SEED LIBRARY MOVEMENT

If you are reading this, you are probably interested in seeds! Perhaps you are already involved in operating a seed library or would like to start one. You are not alone--the seed library (SL) movement is rapidly growing in the United States. The first one was founded in 2000 in Berkeley, California, and there are now over 660 in the country! In Michigan alone there are close to 70, with many of these launching in the past three years.

This free digital resource is intended to help seed librarians or those who want to start a SL succeed by sharing innovative ideas and practices that have worked for SLs around the country, with a special focus on supporting the SL movement in Michigan. All of the links are active--click away to explore!



## WHERE TO BEGIN? STARTING A SEED LIBRARY

Most SLs in the US are housed in public libraries, with a small but growing number in academic libraries; but a seed library can be as simple as a box full of seeds on a counter at a community center to an extensive collection that is integrated into a multi-site library network. I spoke with seed librarians working in public and academic libraries in Michigan, Arizona, California, and Oregon to find out what practices worked best for them, how their SLs had changed over time, and what outreach and programming they used to maintain public interest in and support for their operations.

### **Advice from the Seed Keepers**

When I asked these seed librarians to share their biggest pieces of advice, three things kept being reiterated. They were, in essence:

1. Connect with your community
2. Keep it simple
3. *Just do it!*

Starting and maintaining a SL doesn't need to be expensive or complicated! The seed librarians I spoke to who had changed their libraries had all simplified their practices or wanted to move in that direction. There is no SL prescription or perfect formula for success. Start with what you think will work for your situation and accept that it might change with time as you learn more about your community's needs and what you can manage.

*Watch a webinar on how to start a seed library:  
<https://newdream.org/webinars/seed-library>*

## THE BASICS

Before you begin, consider:

1. What kind of funding do you have/need?
2. How will you organize the library?
3. Where will you get seed?
4. How will you handle returns?
5. Who will manage your SL?
6. Who can help you? Most SLs rely on some volunteer help.

At the very least, you will need:

- Seeds, of course!
- A cabinet, bin, or jars to store seeds & materials
- Envelopes or baggies to repackage seeds
- Labels

There are many free resources available to those who want to start a SL. Many of these were developed by Rebecca Newburn, co-founder of the Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library in Richmond, CA. This SL was fortunate to get a lot of press attention and support from the very beginning, and Rebecca has been instrumental in supporting the SL movement. The "Our Seeds: Seed Lending Library Toolkit" she created covers basic considerations and is a great place to start: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/0B3Gh5zcbD0EKdnR1YWNqYjQ2Vmc/edit>

If you are looking for resources specific to your area, search for other SLs near you and check their websites. This is a movement built on education and sharing, so you will most likely find a lot of information and people who are happy to help!

Depending on how you decide organize the library, you will probably need to purchase some supplies or spend money printing informational materials. The seed librarians I spoke with found that packing materials and labels made up a large part of their budget.

**Tip: Need seeds or other materials? Make a public "Wishlist" to let your community know what you're looking for. One way to do this is with a Google Document that anyone can edit.**



There are several seed companies who will donate seeds, at least initially, so seeds are often not a cost in the beginning. See pg. 10 for a list of potential seed suppliers.

Find educational videos, ideas for special projects, templates for seed saving envelopes, informational brochures and more at <http://seedlibraries.weebly.com/>



To promote their library, the Herrick District SL had a table at their summer festival where children could make a seed ball. How can you get your community engaged? Photo courtesy of Herrick District Library.

## CONNECTING WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

SLs are still a new concept, and many people have never heard of one. In this age of convenience, many people have never grown their own food, let alone from seed. But everyone must eat! Are there particular food cultures in your area that could be represented in your SL? What does your community care about when it comes to gardening? Find out! There are several websites where you can easily create and share free surveys. A simple paper survey located at the site of the future SL could do just as well. Another idea is to hold a focus group or planning session and invite the community to participate.

### **Create a presence.**

Creating a page on your library or organization's main website is important if possible, but social media is a free and easy way to connect with people, help them learn about the SL concept, and spread the word about yours. Justine Hernandez from the Pima County Seed Library in Arizona felt that doing this engaged their community and got people excited.

"We started early on before the seed library was open with social media trying to drum up interest and get community buy-in. I think that really helped us be successful. We grew our presence really rapidly and started getting donations from folks," she said.

### **Build excitement.**

Holding a seedy event is one way to let people know that you will be opening an SL or keep people engaged. A seed swap is one low-cost, fun idea that can draw people in. The annual seed swap at the Bay Area Seed Interchange Library (BASIL) is the SL's biggest event, and is also a source of free stock. "After the swap there are leftovers, so we put them all back into our library," relayed Minna Toloui, the education and engagement program manager at BASIL.

### **Stay in Touch.**

Growing seeds takes time! Collect email addresses when people check out seeds so that you can reconnect with them through periodic newsletters or friendly email reminders to return seeds they have collected.

## Organizational Models

There is no set way to organize a SL. Seed packets can be housed old card catalogs or simply plastic bins. Some SLs in public libraries put barcodes on their packets, integrate them into their checkout systems, and do extensive tracking. Others are very basic and just ask that people log what they take out on a sheet of paper. Some SLs create their own logos and label seed envelopes containing pre-determined amounts of seeds, while others allow people to package their own seeds, taking what they think they can grow. Read on for a few examples of how SLs can be organized.

### "Self-Serve" Model

Richmond Grows is run primarily by Rebecca Newburn with about eight regular volunteers. The library was designed to be "low budget but high impact." Because she has a full-time job as a middle school science teacher and does not work for the library, Rebecca knew that the SL's set-up needed to be simple.

"We needed something that was going to be resilient, whether I have a lot of time for it or not," she said.

Found and donated materials were used to get the library started, and donations were solicited for seeds, which are simply stored in jars that also contain pre-printed labels; people pack the seeds themselves when they check out. This saves SL volunteers a lot of effort. Major clean-up and organization still needs to be done about three times a year.

### Who will be able to use your seed library?

"Ours is pretty informal, it doesn't matter if you have a library card or not. KDL is very much about accessibility and we don't like to have restrictions in place," said Julia Hawkins, manager of the Kent District Library SL system in Grand Rapids, MI.



A SL doesn't need to be big or elaborate to be successful! The display for the East Lansing Public Library fits on a small stand near the checkout counter.

Throwing seed-packing parties or potlucks to process donations and prepare for the growing season is a popular idea that can draw in volunteers. SLs often do this to help get through busy times.

### The Middle of the Road

Many SLs repackage seed in predetermined amounts and store them in repurposed card catalogs. Checkout systems are often as simple as a paper sheet on a clipboard where patrons log what seeds they take along with basic contact information.

Posting clear instructions near your display along with growing calendars for your planting zone and how-to information about seed saving helps reduce confusion. People may be growing seeds for the first time, so the more information, the better!

### Find your zone to see when to plant particular crops in your area:

<https://www.ufseeds.com/learning/planting-schedules/>

### Thinking Big

The Pima County Public Library in Arizona may have the most complex SL system in the US. When librarian Justine Hernandez approached library administration with the idea to start a seed library, they pledged a \$5,000 innovative programming grant and encouraged staff to "think big." Extensive planning and training was done in preparation of launching their SL, with help from the local organization Native Seed/SEARCH (NS/S). In 2012, physical SLs were created at 5 of the county's branches and seeds were integrated into the library's catalog. This meant they could be checked out like any other item as well placed on hold and transferred between all 26 locations, guaranteeing that even small, rural branches have the same access to seeds. Now 10 locations have physical SLs, and the goal is to add one each year until every branch has its own. Individuals are allowed to check out up to 10 seed packs every month. There are never any late fees for seeds, of course, and they are removed from the patron's record after 6 months.

All seed donations, once repackaged, are entered into a database. They are labeled with a unique accession number and designated as local or company donations. As much information as possible about the seeds is saved, including stories and how many packets were created from the donation. This process helps the library manage the health of their collection. If there are any issues with viability, disease, or plants becoming invasive, the library can cull that seed from circulation.

Managing such a large SL presents some challenges. To help ensure that staff at each location is familiar with how the SL works, system-wide trainings are held. How-to information for patrons is posted at SL displays and on the library's website. They are beginning to think about how they can simplify things.



How will your community shape your collection? These are some of the donations the Herrick District SL received in 2018. Photo courtesy of the library.

Justine Hernandez, one of the library's founders, spoke about some of the changes they are considering.

"Right now our collection is enormous and the variety is almost overwhelming. Seven years on we are starting to rethink that. We think of this as our community's resource and that it should be reflective of and steered by our community. The community needs to be more involved, so we're trying to figure out how to do that and have more input from local growers and people who are involved in the food system to help us shape our collection so our collection becomes more of a core collection reflective of the different food cultures here and things that do well here."

**Take a tour of the Pima County Seed Library's website:**  
<https://www.library.pima.gov/seed-library/>

### In the Academic Library

Seed libraries in academic libraries have unique educational opportunities as well as possibilities for networking with on-campus organizations and groups to find volunteers and help promote their SLs. They also may be able to access funding that public libraries can't.

The SL at the Washtenaw Community College (WCC) Bailey Library in Ann Arbor, MI got started in 2014 with \$500 in funding from the Food and Agriculture subgroup of WCC's Sustainability Council. Anyone, not just students, can check out seeds from the library, whether they have a card or not, and librarians Sandra McCarthy and Maureen Perault hope the SL is helping raise awareness about healthy eating and how to grow food.

"The seed library is very popular, very well-received, and people say that it's one of their favorite initiatives on campus," said Maureen.

A well-attended workshop they offered in 2017 with the campus culinary department was a cooking class featuring garlic and herbs. Participants received 5 organic garlic bulbs from a local farm to take home and plant.

### Growing on Campus

Connecting with college gardens or farms is another option for SLs on campus. Heather Spalding, founder of the SL at Portland State University's Sustainability Center, spoke of the garden students are helping create next to their on-campus orchard, which they hope will be an educational opportunity for people walking by. The garden will include a designated seed-saving area,



A large "self-serve" bowl of sunflower seeds donated from a campus garden was part of the 2019 display at the WCC Bailey Library SL.

which will be a place to grow plants that they know work really well there or are special for their SL.

"Sometimes we'll get a seed that's really awesome, but it's a little more rare...like some of the regional lettuces that we get from the smaller growers in our area. That would be an example something we'd want to grow and save," said Heather.

### Who can you connect with on campus?

- Sustainability groups
- Culinary Department
- Horticulture Department
- Campus gardens or farms
- Extension agents
- Student-parent groups

Take a look at the Bailey SL's 2019 Annual Report to learn more about their outreach, marketing, volunteer involvement, programming, and more.

[https://libguides.wccnet.edu/ld.php?content\\_id=50689637](https://libguides.wccnet.edu/ld.php?content_id=50689637)

Reports like this can help show how your SL impacts the community and can be useful when applying for funding opportunities.

## SPOTLIGHT ON A MICHIGAN SL: HERRICK DISTRICT SEED LIBRARY

Launch Year: 2018

Start-Up Budget: \$1,500

Motto: Select, Learn, Grow, Return

Initial Seed Donors: Baker Creek, High Mowing,  
Seed Savers Exchange

Website: <https://herrickdl.org/hdlseedlibrary>

The Herrick District Library (HDL) is located in Holland, MI, near the shores of Lake Michigan. They have two branches, a downtown and North branch, and seeds are available at both locations.

HDL's large, well-lit seed catalog near the main entrance attracts a lot of attention. Hannah Gingrich, who helps develop programs, says some of her ideas are sparked simply from the questions people have about the SL or from overhearing what they talk about as they browse the catalog. A devoted team of people worked together to create the SL, developing the beautiful display and materials. They sent out several proposals for seed donations their first year and were fortunate to get large donations, so they only spent about \$100 on seeds initially. Most funding went towards materials and unique programming.

Information is recorded about the number of different varieties and seed types offered, donations received, how many seed packets staff create throughout the season, and more.



SL Display at Herrick's main branch. The display is located near the entrance, with lights and brightly-colored signs that attract attention. Photo courtesy of Herrick District Library.

Seed packets are labeled with a barcode and checked out through the computer system, making it easy to track which seeds are the most popular and how quickly the SL goes through different types of seeds. Recording all of these statistics helps staff show management that the operation is viable and helps ensure continued funding.

**The SL has been wildly popular. In 2019, patrons checked out over 9,000 packets of seeds, a 59% increase from the first year!**

*"We've created a risk free place to come and learn how to grow plants that you haven't invested any money in, and we can help support you in learning how to do something you might have had to spend a lot of money to learn before." -Kelli Perkins*



An example of one of the seeds from Herrick's core collection. To save time and money, the SL simplified packaging and labeling after the first year, switching to baggies instead of envelopes.

### Innovative Idea: Seed Core

One of the goals of this SL is to focus on creating a "local loop" of food. After being overwhelmed by the sheer diversity of seed they received the first year, organizers decided to choose a "core" group of 5 seed varieties to focus on for 2019, while still offering a wide selection of seeds to check out. For this core, they chose plants that were well-adapted to their region that would span the growing season. This included a pea, a bean, a tomato, a sunflower, and a pumpkin. Donations were still solicited to help stock the library, but SL staff paid for a significant quantity of the core seeds, the goal being that they would not run out of those varieties. Each seed had a "release date" and programming was designed around the core and helping patrons learn how to grow those particular plants well.

**Seeds on Wheels: HDL has a book bike that visits the local farmer's market with books to check out. Now the bike also brings seeds!**

### Programming Idea: Tomato Starting Workshop

To teach patrons about their core tomato, HDL held a tomato-starting workshop with the help of a local community garden director. The library provided soil, cells, and seeds of the variety they had chosen, an heirloom pink type called "Brandywine." Many people who participated in the workshop had never started a seed inside and grown inside for a time before planting out. Even if they had grown tomatoes, they were accustomed to buying plants.

Other core programming 2019 included a pea-planting and trellis-building workshop, planting a sunflower house in the garden at the HDL North branch and sowing one of the core sunflower seeds to take home.

### Events and Outreach

Herrick's PR staff sends out quarterly emails which include a newsletter with seasonal recipes information about seed library programming, and calls for volunteers. SL staff also participate in events to help promote the library. In 2018 they marched in St. Patrick's day parade and handed out seed packets, which was really popular with children. Kids could also make a "seed ball" and learn more about the SL at the library's annual Herrickfest.

*"Our community loves the flowers and the pollinators. They donated largely flowers," said Jen Boyers, one of the founders of the HDL SL, commenting on the donations they received their first year. This was a surprise for the seed librarians, but learning this helped them think about how to shape their collection.*



Sorting and packing seed at HDL. Staff are working on getting a more consistent, trained group of volunteers. Photo courtesy of Herrick District Library.

## MAINTAINING YOUR SEED COLLECTION

Open-pollinated and heirloom seeds are what you want for your SL, as these are typically free to save and share. Seeds saved from hybrids will produce unexpected results or may not germinate. It's important to make sure that donated seeds aren't PVP: protected by the Plant Variety Protection Act.

You will likely get some donations from patrons that are unlabeled or of questionable quality. Ask people to provide as much information as they can about where the seed came from and when it was harvested. Many SLs also collect seed stories if people know have interesting history about the seeds they donate that they want to share.

### Testing, Testing, 1-2-3

None of the seed libraries mentioned in this guide had the time or resources to conduct regular germination testing on donated seed or seed in their collections, although founders or staff members would sometimes take things home to sprout if they were concerned those seeds might be losing viability. For some, this wasn't necessary because they went through most or all of their seed each season.

Most seeds will stay viable for a long time if stored in proper cool, dark, relatively dry conditions, but some have shorter life spans. If you have a large collection with some aging stock, it might be a good idea to test or cull older seed so people aren't disappointed by seeds that won't sprout! Follow the link below for a helpful chart about seed longevity.

### Laws and Regulations

Seed laws vary, and states are beginning to pass laws to protect seed sharing more strongly. However, there have been a few instances of SLs being shut down because they failed to comply with state regulations. It's good to be aware of this, but don't let it stop you! This page links to seed laws by state so you can familiarize yourself: <https://github.com/neilthapar/Seed-Law-Tool-Shed>

Michigan is missing from the list. Find MI's seed laws here:

[https://www.michigan.gov/mdard/0,4610,7-125-2390\\_41275---,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/mdard/0,4610,7-125-2390_41275---,00.html)

### Seed Viability Chart from High Mowing Seeds:

<https://www.highmowingseeds.com/blog/seed-viability-chart/>

## MORE RESOURCES

It's wonderful if you are able to connect with small, local seed companies and seed savers to get stock that is well-adapted to growing conditions in your area. But High Mowing Seeds and Seed Savers Exchange both have donation programs, and many SLs have started using seed from these sources, at little to no cost! Follow the links below to find out more.

### About High Mowing's donation program:

<https://www.highmowingseeds.com/giving-back>

Email: [donations@highmowingseeds.com](mailto:donations@highmowingseeds.com)

### About Seed Savers Exchange donation program:

<https://www.seedsavers.org/seed-donation-program>

**Looking for organic seed grown near you?** This directory can help you find local, organic seed producers: <https://seedalliance.org/directory/>

### Find seed saving best practices and more on the Community Seed Network's site:

<https://www.communityseednetwork.org/home>

## MICHIGAN SEED SUPPLIERS

If you are in the Great Lakes state, there are many local seed companies to connect with.

**Nature and Nurture** seeds in Dexter, MI has a donation program and they are strong supporters of seed saving. More information and the donation request form can be found here: <https://natureandnurtureseeds.com/pages/seed-donation-requests>

**The Small House Farm Seed Collection** is a project of Ben Cohen and his family. Ben is the founder of the Central Michigan Seed Swap, has helped start many SLs in Michigan, is available for educational talks, and is sharing his seed stock widely with local growers to build up a collection of regionally adapted seeds. These will be made available to SLs in Michigan, so they don't have to rely on donations from large companies. More information: <https://www.smallhousefarm.com/seeds/>



Corn seed is difficult to save because of the isolation distances needed to avoid cross-pollination, but it can be fun for informal breeding experiments.

"At our school garden we're doing a popcorn breeding project. We've got 9 different varieties planted and we don't really know what we're breeding for!" said Rebecca Newburn, commenting on an experiment she is doing with her science students.

*Why is bioregional seed important? Learn more:  
<https://smallfarms.cornell.edu/2013/07/the-case-for-regional-seed/>*

## MICHIGAN SEED SUPPLIERS CONT.

**Ann Arbor Seed Company** has an expanding variety of open-pollinated seeds produced right in Ann Arbor. Eric Kampe, one of the owners, is also available for educational talks.  
<https://www.a2seeds.com/>

**Annie's Heirloom Seeds** in Hudsonville, MI produces some of their own seed but also sells heirloom and organic seed grown by small seed farmers across the country and around the world. While they do not have a donation program, they did donate to the Herrick District SL in 2018. <https://www.anniesheirloomseeds.com/>

**Great Lakes Staple Seeds** is committed to growing bioregional seed.  
<https://greatlakesstapleseeds.com/>

### Michigan SL Groups and Websites

Michigan Seed Libraries FB Page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/368991503478080/>

Michigan Seed Library FB Page: <https://www.facebook.com/MISeedLibrary/>

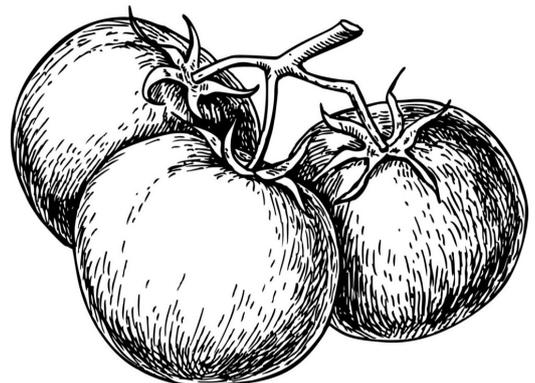
Michigan Seed Library Website: <https://misedlibrary.org/>

Here you will find several seedy resources and a map of all the known SLs in MI.  
Add your seed library to the map!

### Seed and SL-Related Events in Michigan

The Central Michigan Seed Swap is held every year in Midland, MI:  
<https://www.smallhousefarm.com/seedswap/>

The first Michigan Seed Library Summit was held in 2019, and organizers plan to make it an annual event:  
<https://www.facebook.com/events/lyon-township-public-library/michigan-seed-library-summit/404464137092978/>



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"Tiger's Eye" Sunflowers from Ann Arbor Seed Co. growing at an urban farm in Lansing, MI. Unless otherwise noted, all photos are by the author.

"It's magical... Not only growing something, but saving seeds and then knowing that you are contributing to something that might feed someone."

-Justine Hernandez, seed librarian