Svalbard Global Seed Vault

Ashish Nayi[1], Kalyanrao[2], Kalyani Kumari[2] and Pavithra, V.[2]
[1]Department of Seed Science and Technology, AAU, Anand (Gujarat)
[2]ICAR-National Institute of Seed Science and Technology, Mau (Uttar Pradesh)
Corresponding Author: pavithrav.ndri@gmail.com

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Human cultures began to gradually transition from hunting and gathering to growing food approximately 13,000 years ago, marking the beginning of agriculture. However, the methodical preservation of agricultural types is a relatively new phenomenon. Less than a century ago, organized seed conservation got underway. To create new types, plant breeders began compiling seed collections in the 1920s. Scientists gradually broadened these initiatives in an effort to document the entire range of crops before certain cultivars vanished forever.

As agriculture progressed, nations and organizations worldwide began creating seed banks also known as gene banks to preserve the vast array of plant varieties. Today, over 1,700 of these repositories exist, ranging from small collections to those containing more than 500,000 samples. Altogether, they hold approximately 6 million seed entries, with around 1.3 to 1.5 million considered genetically distinct. The sheer breadth of this biodiversity is remarkable: scientists estimate there are nearly 200,000 wheat varieties, 30,000 types of corn, 47,000 kinds of sorghum, and 15,000 groundnut strains. About half of all stored samples are cereal crops, and a similar proportion are maintained in developing nations.

This vast range of crop varieties is more than just a scientific marvel it's the backbone of global food stability. On one hand, consumers seek diverse crops to suit their culinary preferences: the wheat used for pasta isn't the same as that for bread, and the tomatoes for sauces differ from those eaten fresh. On the other hand, farmers depend on this diversity to tackle varying soil conditions, climates, pests, and diseases. Bridging these needs, plant breeders develop crop types that are both high-yielding and widely accepted. Yet, the goalposts are always shifting pests adapt, diseases emerge, climates evolve, and tastes change. To stay ahead, breeders must constantly tap into the genetic wealth preserved in seed banks. Agriculture, in essence, is a dynamic pursuit where, as the Red Queen famously said, one must "run faster and faster just to stay in the same place."

❖ A Global Insurance Policy

Acknowledging the vulnerability of global crop diversity, the Nordic Gene Bank, the Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture and Food, and the Global Crop Diversity Trust collaborated to establish the Svalbard Global Seed Vault as a robust safeguard. On **26 February 2008** Svalbard Global Seed Vault was established which is located in Norway's Arctic Svalbard

Archipelago, the vault leverages natural permafrost, geological stability, reliable infrastructure, and Norway's dedicated support to preserve seeds. Its mission is both straightforward and critical: to serve

as a "fail-safe" against gradual or catastrophic losses of crop diversity. Beyond being a mere "doomsday" repository, the vault plays a vital role in routine protection. If a national gene bank loses samples due to accidents, equipment failures, natural disasters, or political instability, Svalbard can supply replacements, acting as an insurance policy to ensure no crop variety or essential genetic trait is permanently lost.

Why Conservation Matters

The difference between wild and domesticated plants highlights the importance of conservation. Wild plants naturally scatter their seeds through "shattering," but early humans selected non-shattering plants, where seeds clung to stalks for easier harvesting. By cultivating these traits, our ancestors domesticated crops over time. This process took place in regions rich with wild relatives: rice, soy, bananas, and oranges in China; wheat, barley, and lentils in

the Near East; sorghum and watermelon in Africa; and maize, beans, and potatoes in Latin America. These areas, often in today's developing nations, remain hotspots of crop diversity. As crops spread globally with human migration, they adapted to new climates, pests, and cultural needs. For example, maize now exists in forms for flour, popcorn, sugar, beer, animal feed, fuel, and ceremonial purposes, while potatoes vary in colour from white to purple, tailored to diverse climates and nutritional demands. This genetic diversity underpins all such traits, enabling crops to adapt and thrive. Preserving it ensures agriculture's resilience against evolving threats. However, significant diversity has already been lost. A study showed that many crop varieties grown in the U.S. in the 1800s had vanished by the 1980s. In developing nations, the shift to uniform modern varieties since the 1960s has caused widespread genetic erosion, and once lost, unique varieties are nearly impossible to recover.

Inside the Svalbard Global Seed Vault

Seed banks worldwide are vital for safeguarding agricultural diversity, but they face significant risks. Threats like funding shortages, equipment breakdowns, mismanagement, and accidents are common, while natural disasters, wars, and civil unrest have historically wiped-out collections. Losing samples in a seed bank is far more than a setback it can lead to the irreversible loss of unique crop varieties, eliminating genetic traits crucial for developing pest-resistant, heat-tolerant, or nutrient-rich crops. Aware of these vulnerabilities, a small team in 2004 conducted a feasibility study for what would later become the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. They determined that Svalbard, located in Norway's Arctic Archipelago, was the most secure and possibly the only suitable location for such a facility, thanks to its unique combination of advantages. **Natural permafrost** provides long-term freezing, enhanced by mechanical cooling to -18°C.

- ✓ **Geographic remoteness** offers security, while still being accessible for seed transport.
- ✓ **Legal protection** exists through the Svalbard Treaty, which prohibits military activity.
- ✓ **Stable governance** is ensured by Norway, known for trustworthiness and strong international cooperation.
- ✓ **Reliable infrastructure** includes power, communications, and capable local authorities.
- ✓ **Geological stability** makes the mountain site secure, insulated, and far above projected sea-level rise.
- ✓ **Local experience** in underground seed storage already existed, as Nordic countries had stored seeds in a Svalbard coal mine since 1984.

Together, these conditions made Svalbard uniquely suited to host the world's ultimate insurance policy for crop diversity.

Choosing the Site

The Svalbard Global Seed Vault required a location meeting strict criteria. It had to be near Longyearbyen for easy access, close to an existing road to minimize construction costs, and clear of coal seams or cultural artifacts. Crucially, the storage chambers needed to be embedded deep in the mountain's coldest zone, where temperatures naturally range from -4°C to -6°C. Even in extreme climate change scenarios, these conditions are projected to remain stable for at least 200 years, ensuring that seeds would remain safe for an extended period if refrigeration systems failed, allowing time for repairs. Engineers built a 125-meter tunnel into the mountain to reach the site, using equipment from mainland Norway to create three vault chambers, each roughly 27 meters long, 9.5 meters wide, and 5 meters high. Initially planned for two chambers to hold three million seed samples, structural factors prompted the addition of a third chamber, increasing capacity by 50 percent to 4.5 million samples well exceeding the estimated 1.3-1.5 million unique crop varieties worldwide.

Structure and Security

The Svalbard Global Seed Vault has a single, prominent entrance: a triangular concrete structure protruding from the mountain, housing compressors that maintain the seeds at -18°C. From this portal, a sloped tunnel leads visitors past rooms for electrical systems and offices, with further access restricted by multiple locked doors. Entry requires passing through four security barriers: the steel entrance doors, a secondary tunnel door, and two air-locked doors. Electronic systems constantly monitor temperature, gas levels, and other environmental conditions, relaying data to local authorities, the Nordic Gene Bank, and the Global Crop Diversity Trust. The tunnel's design channels any potential blast wave outward, protecting the storage chambers. In compliance with Norwegian law, the facility includes public art a light installation above the entrance by artist Dyveke Sanne, which mirrors the polar light in shimmering greenish-blue hues, acting as both a symbolic guide and a distinctive landmark.

Storage and Management

Within the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, seed samples are stored in laminated, moisture-resistant foil packets, each holding approximately 500 seeds, and sealed in plastic or cardboard boxes. The staff in Svalbard do not open these packets, operating the facility as a "black box" deposit system, akin to a bank's safety deposit box. Ownership of the

seeds remains exclusively with the depositing gene bank, governed by the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, which prohibits any transfer of ownership. Only the original depositor can request the return of their samples. The Vault supports, rather than replaces, active gene banks by storing fresh samples generated when seeds in use lose viability, ensuring the collection remains viable and current. Seed longevity in optimal conditions varies widely: sorghum may last nearly 20,000 years, peas around 10,000, maize over 1,000, while lettuce or sunflower seeds may endure only decades. However, no sample remains untouched for millennia, as ongoing regeneration keeps the collection dynamic. (Pritchard, H.W. and Dickie, J.B. (2003).

Scope and Limitations

On its opening day, February 26, 2008, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault received approximately 100 million seeds (11 tons). By 2024, it held over 1.3 million samples, representing the most extensive collection of agricultural diversity ever assembled. The Vault prioritizes food and agricultural crops, excluding pharmaceutical plants due to the lack of an international conservation framework. Crops like bananas and coconuts, which do not produce viable seeds, require alternative preservation methods. Genetically modified seeds are not accepted, not due to legal restrictions, but because the Vault lacks certification to handle GMOs and aims to avoid political disputes. The Vault also accepts deposits from indigenous communities, with Peru's Parque de la Papa contributing potato seeds in 2015 and the Cherokee Nation becoming the first U.S. tribe to deposit heirloom seeds in 2020.

Funding and Global Cooperation

The Norwegian government financed the construction of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, costing approximately USD $9 million, and supports ongoing maintenance through Statsbygg. The Global Crop Diversity Trust funds operational costs, seed shipments—particularly from developing nations—and long-term conservation efforts via a global endowment, backed by contributors such as the UN Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Top Seed Accessions by Crop

Crop	Approximate Number of Accessions
Wheat	268701
Rice	195302
Barley	119258
Sorghum	71124
Bean	57096
Soybean	55717
Maize	51140
Chickpea	37819
Lucern	32559
Oat	19644
Pea	19461
Lentil	18612
Peanut	18369
Mustard	14749
Pigion pea	14448
Flax	5665
Tomato	5271
Lettuce	5102
Sunflower	4136
Sesame	4050
Gourd	3950
Rye	3259
Okra	3017
Beet	2250
Wild Onion	1910
Wild Carrot	1891
Radish	1781
Watermelon	1258
Acacia	1034
Spinach	949

(**Sources:** https://seedvault.nordgen.org)

India-Origin Contributions to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault

Year / Date	Contributor	Crop(s) / Varieties	Details
Feb 2008 (Vault inauguration)	Government of India	Rice: IR 36, IR 64; Wheat: Lerma Rojo, Sonora 64, Ridley	Symbolic deposit by India's Minister of Science & Technology during the Vault's inauguration.
Apr 9, 2014	NBPGR (ICAR), India	Pigeon pea (Cajanus cajan) – 25 accessions	First official Indian deposit to the Vault; seed samples collected from diverse Indian regions.
Oct 2024	ICRISAT (Patancheru, India)	2,950 seed samples covering 56 species, incl. Pearl millet, Sorghum, 28 wild Arachis spp.	One of the largest recent contributions; safeguarded India's pulse, millet, and groundnut diversity.

(**Source:** OneIndia News (2008); PIB, Government of India (2008); ICAR (2014); Crop Trust (2014); ICRISAT (2024); NordGen (2024))

The Svalbard Global Seed Vault stands as the world's ultimate protector of crop diversity, not a dormant archive but an active reserve supporting global gene banks. Each sealed packet encapsulates centuries of adaptation and human ingenuity, offering a shield for future generations against food insecurity, climate shifts, and unforeseen challenges. As conservationist Aldo Leopold wisely noted, "the first rule of intelligent tinkering is to keep all the pieces." The Svalbard Vault is humanity's stronghold for safeguarding those vital pieces.

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