



## Public Libraries Are Making It Easy to Check Out Seeds—and Plant a Garden

Across the country, libraries are giving away seeds to encourage neighbors to plant food, spend more time outside, and build a relationship with nature.

BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL    APRIL 25, 2022



The MLK branch of the Oakland Public Library. (Photo credit: Celia Davis / OPL)

**A**t the public library in Mystic, Connecticut, a card catalog that formerly stored book due dates now holds endless packets of seeds. There's eggplant and kale, marigolds and zinnias; more than 90 different types of seeds available for anyone with a card to take home and plant.

“The library has become so much more than just a place to come in and get books,” said Leslie Weber, the youth services associate at the Mystic & Noank Library. “It’s becoming a community center, and the seed library fits right into that. It gets people outside, gets children involved with gardening, and we’re pushing to address food insecurity with it.”

The seed library in Mystic is just one of a number that have sprouted up around the country over the last decade—including in Georgia, California, Colorado, Arizona, and Maine—as libraries turn to seeds to help them meet the daily needs of the communities they serve in new ways. By offering patrons free seeds, the libraries can also combat hunger insecurity and biodiversity loss—all while building community resilience.



Toddlers gardening at an Oakland Public Library branch. (Photo credit: Tina Aityan / OPL)

“The American Library Association has added sustainability as a core value of librarianship,” said Jenny Rockwell of the Oakland Public Library’s (OPL) Asian Branch in Oakland, California. “Supporting a relationship with nature through gardening and stewarding seeds supports that intention.”

Seed sharing at public libraries date back to at least 2010, and while no one tracks just how many programs there are across the country, it's likely the number has now reached into the hundreds. Many started after the pandemic forced people outside and encouraged them to find ways to be more resilient, especially in how they procure food.

“This was something good that came out of COVID, because people gained a new appreciation for the outdoors,” said Mystic & Noank Library Director Christine Bradley. During the early part of the pandemic, she said, “We did all the children’s programming outdoors, we set up picnic tables, we started a children’s garden, and now we’re planning a whole library park. The seed library fits right in.”

## **The Give and Take**

**T**he César E. Chávez Branch of the OPL system was the first of the city’s 17 locations to start a seed library, in 2012, inspired by librarian Pete Villasenor, who saw one at the Potrero branch of the San Francisco Public Library.

“We love showing our patrons that it doesn’t have to be difficult to start their own gardens with the free seeds we offer here,” said Villasenor.



The seed lending library at the César E. Chávez branch of the Oakland Public Library. (Photo credit: Claire Johnson / OPL)

Over the years, more branches within the OPL system have added seed libraries—and after interest surged in 2020, OPL expanded its seed libraries to eight locations, with another expected to open soon.

While each public library seed collection works differently, most allow patrons to take a certain number of seeds whenever they want. Traditionally, people have been encouraged to contribute seeds in reciprocity, either when they buy too many or collect them in their gardens. However, that policy varies between states as some state laws prohibit specific labels or require testing of seeds.

Librarians often replenish their seed stocks by soliciting donations from nonprofit organizations and seed companies, such as the Seed Savers Exchange and Hudson Valley Seed Company (HVSC). Between November 2021 and February 2022, HVSC donated

roughly 10,000 seed packets to seed libraries, schools, educational programs, and community gardens. Of the more than 200 requests for seeds from more than 30 states and Canada this year, slightly more than half of those requests came from people at institutions that were just starting a seed library or had been seeing much more demand.

“We’ve been making donations since we started,” said Catherine Kaczor, the sales and marketing manager at HVSC. “It’s always been important for us to share that potential food and beauty. People deserve good food and vegetables that are part of their culture and their community.”



Photo credit: Doug Zimmerman / OPL)

Some libraries also purchase seeds to give away. “In general, it is a lot of work for librarians to regularly solicit donations and funding for the seeds,” said Rockwell, who says that keeping up with demand is nearly impossible. “Because the program is so popular and

continues to expand, we are looking into identifying a consistent source of funding to buy seeds in a streamlined way instead of each library coordinating on their own [by] identifying donors.”

## Beyond Seed Distribution

Some seed libraries go far beyond simply handing out seeds. Many have created community workshops, events, and other programming to educate the community about seed saving, seed sovereignty, gardening, and urban agriculture.

Some libraries—including the Mystic & Noank Library in Connecticut and the César E. Chávez Branch in Oakland—also have gardens on the library grounds where community members can grow or harvest food.

“The garden has brought a lot of positivity and joy to our community and staff,” said Villasenor of the Chávez branch. The library’s Huerta de Dolores garden, named for Dolores Huerta, the co-founder of the United Farm Workers labor union who worked alongside César Chávez, has enabled some library patrons to adopt a small plot of soil in the shared space and inspired others to start their own gardens at home. “We all find that being out in the garden helps to relieve stress and helps to build community between patrons from all walks of life,” Villasenor said.

The Huerta de Dolores garden also includes a volunteer and youth intern program and the staff there work with the adult transition program at the Ala Costa Center, a nonprofit community-based organization that serves young adults with developmental disabilities. Volunteers help with everything from seed sorting, repacking, and organizing, to pruning, planting, weeding, and watering in the garden.

Other libraries within the OPL system offer additional programs around the seed libraries, including giving away soil pellets, and growing instructions. More recently at a different branch, the library distributed grab-and-grow kits for Asian Pacific Heritage Month in May, which included free seeds, growing instructions, recipes, and more.

Many libraries also encourage patrons to grow food for food banks with the seeds they receive. Weber and Bradley at the Mystic & Noank Library are urging patrons who take seed packets to plant an extra row to donate to local food banks as part of the Connecticut Food Bank’s Plant a Row for the Hungry program.

They are also considering planting a giving garden at the library where everything grown would be donated to a food bank in addition to the children's garden they already offer (at which this author volunteers).

## **Pandemic-Driven Change**

**T**he seed library at the Jefferson Public Library in Jefferson, Georgia started in 2019 and has rapidly grown in popularity since then. Elizabeth Jones, the library's evening supervisor and seed librarian, estimates the library served 35 people in 2019, more than 200 in 2020, and more than 300 in 2021. She expects to surpass that number this year.

When COVID shut down the Jefferson library, its librarians turned their attention to the library's website, which they sought to make, among other things, "a one-stop place for gardening expertise," Jones said.

The two main goals of the seed library, Jones said, are to educate novice and experienced growers alike and to create a genetically diverse local seed stock that's acclimated to region despite a changing climate. In addition to providing seeds, the Jefferson seed library offers programs on topics including saving and cleaning seeds, composting, and preserving food. It also hosts a vegetable swap and a potluck where patrons can compare gardening notes.



(Photo credit: Celia Davis / OPL)

While Jones and the Jefferson Public Library focused on their website during the COVID shutdowns, others locations, including OPL and the University of San Francisco (USF) Seed Library, which started in 2014, used the pandemic as an opportunity to strengthen and grow their seed libraries. USF offered several different online classes and helped lead class discussions about the global seed industry and found ways to mail seeds to interested people.

“We want to reduce barriers to growing food,” said Carol Spector, a librarian at the USF Seed Library. “Sure, seeds aren’t expensive—but if they’re free and you can try it, it takes the risk out of it.”

Open to students and faculty, the USF Seed Library is a joint program between the school’s library and the its Urban Agriculture Department. Containing 40 to 50 seed varieties in labeled coin envelopes, the collection prioritizes organic, heirloom, and culturally relevant seeds, with 20 to 30 types available at any given time based on the season.



Offerings have evolved over the years to meet students' needs. "At first we prioritized vegetables," Spector said, "but over time, students became interested in flowers and herbs, which are often easier to grow on a dorm windowsill."

Students within the urban agriculture program are introduced to the library during class; field trips to the library involve talks on how seed libraries can protect heirloom seeds and cultural traditions and the global decline in the genetic diversity of seeds.

The hope—at USF and beyond—is to help people begin to see how growing food as an individual connects to the larger web of production and consumption with an eye toward improvement. "It's a way for students to learn about the food system in a really engaging way," said Spector.



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