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The Toronto Seed Library

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Purpose and evolution

The Toronto Seed Library was born when Jacob Kearey-Moreland heard a friend mention the idea of a tool library. Jacob brought the idea to his fellow coordinator of Occupy Gardens Toronto, Katie Berger, who decided to take on the creation of a seed library as her major research project for York University's master of environmental studies programme. With the moral support of the Toronto Seedy Saturday and Sunday steering committee and the national Seeds of Diversity network, work to set up the library started. Kearey-Moreland and Berger, along with Brendan Behrmann, a librarian recently graduated from the University of Toronto's iSchool, are the current coordinators. The Toronto Seed Library is registered with the Seed Library Social Network (www.seedlibraries.org/).

The initial organizational and operational set up was shaped with input from the public in early 2013. A 'learning by doing' approach was adopted, and collecting and lending seeds began right away. During the first season, thousands of seeds were collected, sorted and shared with hundreds of people; about 3,000 small packages of seeds were distributed. At the same time, a seed awareness and education campaign was carried out through seed sharing and saving events (Plate 6), workshops and social media. Bi-weekly events including volunteer information sessions, seed sorting and packaging parties, basic seed-saving workshops and branch launch events were organized. Coordinators also helped organize a large anti-genetically modified alfalfa demonstration (9 April 2013) and the March Against Monsanto (25 May 2013). On 7 May 2013, they made a presentation at the York–University of Toronto–Ryerson Library Staff Conference themed 'Why libraries matter'.

Between April and June 2013, five community branches across the city opened: Permaculture Project GTA Headquarters Branch (Scarborough); Toronto Tool Library Branch (Parkdale); Saint Stephen-in-the-Fields Church Branch (Kensington Market); Regenesi@York University Branch and High Park Nature Centre Branch, all of which welcome folks to borrow seeds during opening hours or by appointment.

International cooperation is taking place with other individuals and organizations related to the Fortnight of Seed Freedom called for by Dr. Vandana Shiva as part of the international movement for seed sovereignty.

Goals and operations

The Toronto Seed Library is governed by the idea that seeds should not and cannot be privately owned, but should be shared freely among all people at the local and community levels. Its coordinators believe that seeds should not be commodified in any way; thus, the seed library does not charge users for seeds. Borrowers are encouraged and enabled to participate to the degree they wish. Regular volunteer orientation sessions are held for those looking to find their role in the seed library.

Although seed libraries and community seed banks have many functions in common, traditionally ‘banks’ focus on conserving seeds for future use while a library’s primary focus is dissemination of seeds to as many people as possible. The Toronto Seed Library avoids association with or the use of the term ‘banks’ as these institutions are the cornerstone of modern capitalism and are fundamentally antithetical to the ideology and values behind the Toronto Seed Library project. Just as traditional libraries help to facilitate literacy, the seed library helps to spread seed and food literacy.

The Toronto Seed Library provides a freely accessible alternative to the genetically modified seeds produced by large corporations, as well as print and other resources for new seed savers and gardeners and a platform for seed–food–environmental education. Through educational outreach and events, it promotes the introduction of seed saving and sharing into the mainstream, encourages people to ‘connect’ with seeds and take an active part in growing food and advocates increased biodiversity and awareness of its relation to cultural diversity.

Seeds are donated to the library by individuals, seed companies and retail stores. Currently, most donors are mid-sized to large businesses, with a smaller portion from individual seed savers and community groups. However, as people in the area become more informed about and skilled at seed saving, it is hoped that the vast majority of seeds will come from community members and groups. The library accepts all seeds regardless of condition. For example, seeds that have outlived their shelf life and no longer meet commercial standards and seeds with questionable origin are shared freely for the purpose of engaging new gardeners, growing experience, experimentation and food production. However, only organic seeds – either certified or believed to be organic – are loaned for the purpose of seed saving.

When seeds are donated, the only information required is the type of seeds and where and when they were grown (e.g. holy basil, Hart House garden, 2012). Sometimes people provide additional information, which is passed along to borrowers. More general traditional knowledge about seed farming and saving is communicated through seed-saving workshops run by elders in our community.

In addition to the five branches, a very active 'roaming branch' travels across the city and disperses seeds at a wide range of food, gardening and environmental events. Community members can check out seeds from any branch in the city. The only requirements for borrowing seeds are to sign up to receive electronic updates and seed-saving information and to make an informal commitment to try to save some seeds from the plants grown and bring them to the library.

Currently, the mailing list includes almost 1,000 people, the vast majority of whom borrowed seeds from the seed library during the 2013 growing season. Borrowers are an incredibly diverse group and vary depending on the branch or event location. Because of the coordinators' personal and professional connections with local universities, students have made up a large proportion of participants. All types of urban farmers use the library, from allotment tenders to balcony-container farmers. Numerous reports from library users provide evidence that they are now harvesting and enjoying much higher-quality produce than they previously had access to.

Within the seed collection, there is a very small stock of rare seeds that are reserved for experienced seed savers who can ensure their reproductive success. Seed supply has been greater than could be handled, and the plan is now to establish a more sophisticated growing programme linked with more established seed farmers and savers in the region outside the city where there is more room to grow.

The variety of seeds in the library is constantly increasing, particularly through connections with Toronto's various ethnic and cultural communities. Gardens across the city are growing a diversity of crops, which are locally adapted and passed on through families and cultural communities and are now being shared through the Toronto Seed Library.

In addition to the three coordinators, six semi-regular volunteers help with running events, outreach, graphic design, etc. In terms of other participants, thus far joining the seed library mailing list has been the informal equivalent to becoming a member.

Costs and support

The main monetary costs have been for packaging materials, specifically paper envelopes to hold the seeds. Another large portion of funds has been used to print posters and flyers for outreach. The seed library is in the process of establishing a web site, which will also require money to maintain. No money has been spent on seeds or labour, as these resources have been donated by businesses and the community.

The seed library receives technical support in terms of seed identification, cleaning and storing methods, etc. from experienced elders in the Toronto seed community. It receives financial support from individual donors, with countless contributions of CA\$1–20 used primarily for outreach materials and costs related to holding events. Several large donations of seeds from two corporations were received and accepted with the understanding that no

conditions were attached, as the seed library does not advertise or promote corporations indirectly or directly. Strong moral support comes from the established seed-saving community within the greater Toronto area, as well as established food and gardening organizations that recognize the potential benefits of a free city-wide community seed library. Moral support has also come from a variety of city councillors, academics, farmers and consumers.

Links and networking

The seed library fosters connections with other emerging seed libraries in the Toronto area, around Ontario and, to a lesser extent, across North America. This includes hosting meetings with neighbouring seed librarians and communications via telephone, social media and email with more distant partners. The Toronto Seed Library has been a source of inspiration for new seed libraries in the region, including those in rural communities, such as Orillia, Ontario. The seed library actively supports campaigns run by the National Farmers' Union and the Canadian Biotech Action Network. Links have not yet been formed with the formal gene bank network in Canada.

The library plans to develop closer ties with the Canadian Seed Library (CSL), a project of Seeds of Diversity, the pre-eminent national organization that has led the domestic resurgence in seed saving. The CSL is housed in a farm just outside Toronto; from it, seeds are mailed across the country to experienced member seed growers, primarily hobby seed savers and small-scale seed farmers. The Toronto Seed Library hopes to become integrated with the CSL to offer community-based seed libraries within public libraries, so that anyone can borrow and grow seeds and have free and easy access to the knowledge and resources they need to grow their own food and seed supply. Community-based seed libraries are the next phase in the evolution of seed banks, with their emphasis on sharing of seeds, knowledge and resources.

Policy and legal environment

Next to the United States, Canada has the most highly developed industrial food system in the world. Most Canadian farmers are integrated into the corporate food and seed regime, which is heavily regulated and subsidized by the highest levels of government. The Toronto Seed Library has no direct involvement in legislation or lobbying for farmers' rights, except in terms of raising awareness of issues affecting rural communities and farmers. The seed library is specifically interested in municipal food policy, which supports the integration of the Toronto Seed Library within the Toronto Public Library system and the Toronto District School Board. There are 97 public libraries and hundreds of public schools in Toronto. If even a small fraction of these institutions housed a branch of the seed library, this could contribute significantly to an increase in food and seed awareness and even in food and seed sovereignty and security in Toronto, as well as increasing support for an improved regional food system.

The Toronto Seed Library has been informally lobbying the municipal government and community partners to include the Toronto Seed Library project as part of the new GrowTO Action Plan for scaling up urban agriculture in Toronto. Formal partnerships with the Toronto Public Library and the Toronto District School Board would significantly increase the capacity of the seed library by harmonizing its efforts with those of existing institutions, infrastructure and government programmes. Federal and provincial seed regulations do not affect the daily operations of the seed library, as they largely apply to commercial and large-scale operators.

Challenges

Current challenges for the seed library include funding and the time and energy commitment needed from the coordinators and volunteers. Although the coordinators have been working full time on the project, the Toronto Seed Library has grown at an unexpected rate, and it has often been difficult to manage without paid staff.

There is also a risk that users may not be able to return seeds or will return seeds of lesser quality, as most participants are first-time growers; currently, the library has few safeguards to ensure the quality of returned seed. Quality-control standards are being developed to be implemented in the second season, spring 2014.

Space is a major challenge in Toronto, particularly for seed production, and labour and time constraints keep the library from putting many of its ideas into practice. Although the project is still in its infancy, it is confident of ongoing and future support from larger institutions, such as the Toronto Public Library and the Toronto District School Board, as well as colleges, universities and other food and farming organizations.

Sustainability and prospects

Sustainability can be achieved through collaborative partnerships with public libraries, schools and community groups. Using open-source philosophy and technology, the seed library can establish a platform that enables the mass participation and collaboration necessary to maintain a free, self-perpetuating public resource. The Toronto Seed Library could be part of a national or international network of seed libraries. Just as public libraries exchange books and other items within and between systems, so can the seed library exchange seeds with regional partners and others with similar climate conditions. Furthermore, the seed library hopes to collaborate through educational and promotional materials and collective action to secure further public support.

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