

Sowing Revolution

Seed Libraries Offer Hope for Freedom of Food

by Bill McDorman & Stephen Thomas

The seed revolution began one sunny afternoon on a neatly mowed lawn at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds. For such a historic moment, it wasn't much to gawk at — a circle of about a dozen seedsmen and seedswomen sitting cross-legged in the grass, laying out the blueprint for an agricultural uprising.

The gathering took place in the midst of the National Heirloom Exposition; a three-day trade show for heirloom foods held this past September in Santa Rosa, California. Weeks earlier a call had gone out on Facebook for an informal meeting among a coterie of folks in various stages of visioning, building, and running seed libraries. Following the model of lending libraries for books, a seed library works pretty much as you'd imagine. Seeds are “checked out” with the intention to plant them in a garden, enjoy the fresh food, and keep a couple of plants in the ground to go to seed. The saved seed is then “returned” to the library — ideally, in more abundance than what was borrowed. Though not altogether new, the concept has recently sprouted legs and is spreading swiftly across the country.

Seated in the circle were some of the key figures in the emerging seed library movement, with representatives from both U.S. coasts: Ken Greene, co-founder of the Hudson Valley Seed Library in upstate New York; David King, founder and chairman of the Seed Library of Los Angeles; and Rebecca Newburn, creator of the Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library in California's East Bay. It was clear to all assembled that they were onto something big. *The New York Times* had published a feature on seed libraries months earlier, and the buzz was continuing to build. The time had come to solidify the ranks. In a unanimous vote, the group moved to form a national as-



The seed library revolutionaries gather outside the National Heirloom Exposition in Santa Rosa, California.

sociation of seed libraries — a unifying body to advance the growing movement.

The backdrop for this radical convergence was fitting. Billed as “the World's Pure Food Fair,” the National Heirloom Expo was at its essence a show of solidarity for heritage foods against the corporate-agricultural machine. The gala event played host to more than 10,000 people browsing the crop-laden exhibit halls: a diverse mix of CSA farmers and hobby gardeners, die-hard foodies and organic chefs, green activists and apocalyptic “preppers.” On the surface the event was a celebration of biodiversity, but the political undercurrent was clear with prominent GMO critic Jeffrey Smith and anti-globalization activist Vandana Shiva among the weekend's keynote speakers. (I counted around a dozen uses of the word “war” during Shiva's fiery speech railing against Big Ag.) Between the garden-chic displays of fairytale pumpkins

and tiger-striped tomatoes, something far more subversive was spreading its roots.

In other words, it was the ideal gathering grounds to rally awareness around that vital, but often overlooked, keystone of the sustainability discussion — seeds. The time is ripe for this awakening. Biodiversity among our food crops has plummeted over the past 50 years following the meteoric rise of industrial agriculture. Only 4 percent of the commercial vegetable varieties being grown in 1903 are still in cultivation today. In their place, vast fields of genetically modified corn, canola, cotton and soy now blanket the world's farmlands. Multinational agribusiness corporations like Monsanto and DuPont realized early on that control over seeds was the key to global domination of food supplies. Over the past two decades these industrial giants have aggressively swallowed up dozens

Seed Libraries Across the United States

BASIL (Bay Area Seed Interchange Library) — Berkeley, CA — www.ecologycenter.org/BASIL

Hudson Valley Seed Library — Accord, NY — www.seedlibrary.org

Native Seeds/SEARCH — Tucson, AZ — www.nativeseeds.org

Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library — Richmond, CA — www.richmondgrows.org

SLoLA (Seed Library of Los Angeles) — Los Angeles, CA — www.slola.org

Westcliffe Seed Lending Library — Westcliffe, CO — www.westcliffegrows.weebly.com

For information and resources to start your own seed library, visit Richmond Grows online:
www.richmondgrows.org/create-a-library.html

of smaller seed companies in a cutthroat race for market supremacy. According to the latest figures from the ETC Group, a sustainable agriculture think tank, Monsanto sits at the top of the raking with 27 percent of total seed sales worldwide.

The current paradigm of food — centrally controlled by profiteering corporations and besieged by the life-destroying government policies that support them — stands in stark contrast to the sovereign agriculture of our ancestors. Seed saving is an ancient tradition with a lineage stretching back 12,000 years. But in less than a century's time, this once fundamental part of the human experience has largely disappeared. The transition from rural agrarianism to urbanization has led to increasingly fewer people growing food and interacting with seeds. When the industrial storm of the "Green Revolution" gave rise to mammoth-scale monoculture farms, saving one's own seed for replanting became far too cumbersome a prospect — not to mention, genetically undesirable and contractually illegal with the advent of hybrids and gene patenting. In just a few generations, both the time-honored knowledge of seed saving and many irreplaceable seeds are nearing extinction.

It is no small matter, then, that we are witnessing a resurgence of interest in heirloom crops. A consciousness shift is taking place around the politics of food in the modern world. People are waking up to the battle raging over our dinner plates and realizing that victory hinges upon who controls the tiny seeds that are the source of all sustenance. To restore

our freedom over food, it is essential that every community have access to a collectively owned treasure chest of seeds. Seed libraries represent our best hope for reclaiming this independence. As an added benefit, they boost regional biodiversity and resiliency by encouraging the cultivation of new crop varieties adapted to local growing conditions. With global temperatures on the rise and financial markets plummeting, a robust network of community foodsheds to replace the shaky monolith of industrial agriculture has become imperative for human survival.

The seed library story begins, appropriately, with a rebellion. In late Novem-

ber 1999, thousands of anti-globalization activists descended on Seattle to protest a meeting of the World Trade Organization. The massive demonstrations shut down the city for days. Sascha DuBrul, a 24-year-old activist and New York native living in Berkeley, took part in the protests and returned to California charged with excitement. "It was a really vibrant time," he recalls. "Here in the Bay Area, there were all these amazing projects starting up that are still around."

Seeds were DuBrul's newly discovered passion. While interning at a CSA farm in British Columbia the previous year, he became fascinated by the invigorating genetic relationships that arose when



The Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library and its founder, Rebecca Newburn.

domestic crops intermingled with their wild relatives. Diversity was the key to the health of a community, he realized, be it plant or human. This idea had great relevance to urban spaces where people live in close quarters but thrive on cultural differences. "I had this vision of articulating the relationship between biological and cultural diversity, and bringing that idea to kids in the city," says DuBrul.

That opportunity soon came following a Faustian deal between the University of California at Berkeley and the Swiss agribusiness giant Novartis. One of the first decrees under the alliance was for the eviction of an on-campus CSA farm to make way for trials of genetically modified corn. "There were all these seeds left over in a cabinet and nothing was going on," recalls DuBrul. "So I thought, 'Hey, why don't we start a seed library?' We could have a collection of seeds that people can take out, and then have regular seed saving workshops where gardeners can come and learn the basic techniques." His vision quickly blossomed into the first seed lending library: the Bay Area Seed Interchange Library, or BASIL.

DuBrul counts an unlikely pair of inspirations behind his BASIL project: Gary Paul Nabhan, co-founder of Native Seeds/SEARCH and father of the local food movement, and the Black Panthers. "Reading [Nabhan's] book *Enduring Seeds* rocked my world," he says, "and the Panthers had this history of community controlled movements where people took over their communities for their own." Over the next nine months BASIL flourished out of the nonprofit Ecology Center as a grassroots hub for seed saving and self-reliance in the Berkeley community. But DuBrul, who suffers from bipolar disorder, found himself unable to see the project through. The pioneering seed library was kept alive as an annual seed swap while its founder moved on to other ventures.

Years later, in 2003, DuBrul was working on another small farm, this time in upstate New York. During a trip to the local Gardiner Public Library,

he met a young librarian named Ken Greene. The two had a common interest in agriculture, and DuBrul told his new friend about BASIL. The connection set Greene's mind running. "What does loss of genetic diversity mean?" he mused. "For me, there were two stories that were being lost: the genetic story told from the seeds we grow and save, and the cultural story that goes along with them." There was a profound connection between the seemingly disparate worlds of books and seeds, he realized. Both represent incredible repositories of information, cultural wealth, and history. Much like books went out of print and disappeared from circulation, genetic diversity among seeds was rapidly fading away as gardeners and farmers stopped seeking out and cultivating unique varieties. The solution was suddenly obvious. Greene proposed to his director, an avid gardener herself, his idea of adding seeds to the branch's catalog. She assented, and a seed library inside a public library was born.

The Gardiner Seed Library met with enthusiasm from the community. Before long, Greene was teaching seed saving classes to encourage more participation. For five years the project grew steadily under his direction. But the small town librarian was imagining bigger things. He'd long dreamed of becoming a farmer, and his intensive relationship with seeds had opened up some new ideas.

In 2008 he uprooted his seed project from the Gardiner library and set up shop on two acres of farmland in Accord, New York. Called the Hudson Valley Seed Library, the new venture is different in some notable ways. For starters, the library is organized and run online, opening it up to a much broader community of users. This strategy appears to have real merit; within its first year of operation, membership swelled from 60 to 500 people. Anyone can buy seed off the website, but for an annual fee of \$25 members receive ten free seed packs and gain access to an expanded "Library" collection. "If we were going to commit ourselves to running the library full time, we had to come up with



Sascha DuBrul, founder of the BASIL seed library, winnows chaff from fresh seed.

a way to make it financially sustainable," says Greene about the paid membership structure.

Together with his partner Doug Muller, Greene personally grows a portion of the seed he offers. Much of the remaining stock is sourced from a network of small, conscientious farms growing under the same seasonal conditions. Having a dependable source of fresh seed is important for the operation; returns to the library are not required, and getting people to follow through on returning seed has been a challenge. Greene identifies this as part of a cultural mindset he is working to change. As a new incentive program, library members who return seed will receive a discount on their next year's membership fee. "A lot of people are just more comfortable buying something every year," he says. "We're trying to encourage them to take the responsibility of being a producer."

As the Hudson Valley operation ramps up, another front in the seed revolution is brewing on the opposite coast. The Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library opened for business in the spring of 2010 inside the main branch of the Richmond Public Library in California's East Bay. Colorful signs hanging prominently above a repurposed card catalog cabinet instruct users in the process of checking out seeds from

drawers labeled “Super Easy,” “Easy,” and “Difficult.” Beans, peas and peppers rank among the beginner’s veggies, while out-crossing crops like corn and squash are reserved for more advanced seed savers.

Richmond Grows is the brainchild of Rebecca Newburn, a middle school science-teacher-turned-community-activist who has taken up the mantle for local seed sovereignty. While her public library model has a clear precedent in Ken Greene’s Gardiner project years prior, Newburn came up with the concept independently. And the coincidental connections don’t stop there. The germ of the idea, in both cases, can be traced to the same inspirational source: Sascha DuBrul. After spending time volunteering at DuBrul’s now 12-year-old (and still kicking) BASIL organization, Newburn was encouraged to start a community seed project of her own. “I really love the work they are doing at BASIL and wanted to make it more accessible to the general public,” she explains. “So I created a seed library in my local public library.”

In many ways, hosting a community seed reserve inside a public library is a match made in heaven. Maintaining any sizeable collection of seeds is first and foremost a challenge in organization. Varieties must be kept separate and neatly cataloged, with all relevant data such as harvest dates accurately recorded. This type of work — organizing complex collections of information — is, of course, what libraries do best. Furthermore, the long-standing legitimacy of the library as an American institution could play a crucial role in the safekeeping of these collections. It could very well come to pass that lawmakers doing the bidding of Big Agriculture decide to crack down on these open-source community seed vaults. Imagine

the scandal and outrage that would ensue if the USDA ran a campaign raiding public libraries to confiscate their seditious seeds.

For libraries across the country facing steep declines in users, adding a seed library to their services makes a lot of sense to attract new visitors. With the right vision, these increasingly marginalized public spaces can be transformed into vibrant community hubs for sustainability and self-reliance. The Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library is a shining example of this vision bearing fruit. In addition to hosting seed saving workshops and events, the group has set up a demonstration garden on the library grounds where people can stroll through and watch seed harvesting in action.

Following the success of Richmond Grows, more and more libraries are beginning to crop up. “The idea is spreading fungally,” says Newburn. “There are about 30 other libraries that we’ve heard of that are in progress. Communities want to have access to healthy, locally grown and adapted seeds.” So far, many newly established seed libraries are concentrated in California, but the word is getting out. An article in the April 2011 issue of the trade magazine *American Libraries* heralded the rise of seed libraries as a promising trend in the industry. To help nurture this blooming phenomenon, Richmond Grows has added a “Create a Library” page on their website with step-by-step instructions for getting started, alongside a comprehensive kit of downloadable signage, labels, and brochures.

While the public library is an ideal home for a local seed collection, it isn’t the only game in town. Ken Greene’s Hudson Valley project started out among the bookshelves but eventually morphed into a very different model:

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Native Seeds/ SEARCH presents **Seed Library School**

- Seed School is an innovative six-day immersion into the history, science, and business of seeds.
- April 12 – April 14, 2012, Native Seeds/SEARCH welcomes Rebecca Newburn of Richmond Grows for a special three-day Seed Library training. Seed School and its offshoots (Grain School and Fruit School) are held at the Native Seeds/SEARCH Conservation Center in Tucson, Arizona. To register for an upcoming session, visit: www.nativeseeds.org.

a paid membership service hosted online. Likewise, the Seed Library of Los Angeles, or SLoLA, which opened last year at Venice High School’s nonprofit Learning Garden, accepts new lifetime members for a nominal fee of \$10. In Greene’s view, there is no “one way” to run a community seed project. Just as local library branches are tailored to best serve their communities, seed libraries are taking on their own uniquely adapted designs. “That’s one of the most exciting things about what’s happening with local seeds right now,” observes Greene. “Everyone can do it differently.”

Regardless of its structure, the arrival of each new seed library represents a new, radically decentralized approach to food security. Those at the vanguard of the movement recognize the revolutionary importance in their work. “No one is demanding any transparency or accountability from the big seed companies,” says Greene. “More and more, the only way we will have any kind of seed sovereignty is by saving our own seeds and sharing them.” Newburn agrees, pointing to the spread of seed libraries as the key to sustainability in an uncertain future: “We’re seeing the rebirth of

seed saving as an essential part of home gardening and local resilience. My vision is that more and more communities will have seed libraries and systems for sharing locally grown seeds.”

People everywhere are beginning to recognize the crucial link between humanity, the crops that sustain us, and their embattled seeds. We are on the cusp of a seed saving renaissance — and not a moment too soon. A recent report in the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that Monsanto has set its sights on a new target market: the garden vegetable seed industry. Employing intensive breeding technologies, Monsanto aims to concoct newfangled veggies with bizarre traits they imagine consumers will eagerly devour. Shoppers will be able to load up on heads of cholesterol-lowering broccoli, quicker-ripening melons, and onions that cause less eye-watering when sliced. Steve Peters, former head of production at Seeds of Change and now with the Family Farmer Seed Cooperative, summed this disturbing news up best: “Monsanto wants to take the tears out of onions. What’s wrong with tears?”

It seems a decisive battle for seed supremacy may be sprouting. Thankfully, sustainable farmers and gardeners are rallying. Like-minded groups across the country are setting up new seed libraries and exchanges. A tight-knit network of seed activists is coming together as the movement matures and expands. Last April, I stepped into the role of executive director at Native Seeds/SEARCH, a nonprofit seed bank and conservation center in Tucson, Arizona, with the intention to fill the void in educational opportunities for this new paradigm of seed activism. Our six-day intensive seed-training program known as “Seed School” recently sent its 80th graduate into the world armed with the knowledge and inspiration to advance the local seed movement. Many of the movers and shakers in the seed library scene, including Rebecca Newburn of Richmond Grows and SLoLA founder David King, are Seed School graduates. Others have gone on to start their own small bioregional seed companies, local seed banks,

and innovative grassroots seed projects. In light of the challenges we face, this is heartening stuff.

The ultimate success of the seed diversity movement rests in the reeducation and involvement of the population at large. As Ken Greene observes, so many of us are in the habit of buying seeds. Here in Tucson, our plan is simple: we are going to make our city Seed Town. As our tagline and T-shirts read, “We take care of our own.” With five seed libraries starting up in branches of our Pima County Library System (thanks to librarian and Seed School graduate Justine Hernandez) and one of the world’s best regional seed banks at Native Seeds/SEARCH, Tucson is on track to build the seed diversity necessary for a truly sustainable and self-reliant food system. When members of the urban and organic agriculture

movements awoken in a few years and realize they are supporting industrially-produced, corporate-owned seeds, it is our hope they will look to Tucson as a model for local seed sovereignty.

The seed revolution is underway as communities do what comes naturally — grow food, save seeds, and share the harvest. Victory never tasted so good.

Bill McDorman is executive director of Native Seeds/SEARCH, a 28-year-old Southwestern seed conservation organization based in Tucson, Arizona. He is the founder of three seed companies, including Seeds Trust, and author of the 1994 book *Basic Seed Saving*.

Stephen Thomas is an itinerant writer originally from Atlanta, Georgia. He is one of the founding contributing editors for *RealitySandwich.com* where he covers the environment, culture and consciousness as ST Frequency. Recently transplanted to Tucson, Stephen is development assistant at Native Seeds/SEARCH, a seed conservation nonprofit.



Photo by Richard A. Smith

Ken Greene (left) and Doug Muller carry melons for seed processing at their Hudson Valley Seed Library.