



Discussion #2: Seed Return and Stewardship - Notes

Date: Tuesday, August 27th

Time: 11am PST, 2pm EST

Hosts: [Community Seed Network](#), [Seeds of Diversity Canada](#), [FarmFolk CityFolk](#)

Number of participants: 23

[A bit about those in attendance during this series](#)

Our second and final discussion in this series was all about seed return and stewardship. Below is the agenda which guided our hour-long get together.

1. Welcome, host introductions, and session framing (10 minutes)
2. Breakout rooms (35 minutes)
3. Debrief and wrap-up (15 minutes)

The session began with a brief introduction to the facilitators and organizations hosting the discussion, as well as the reasons for organising the session.

Then, we broke out into three breakout rooms for more intimate, focused discussions. Below is an overview of some of the main themes, followed by more detailed notes from each room.

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General Themes & Thoughts

Prompts for discussion:

1. How/does seed return from patrons impact your seed collection?
2. What challenges have you had? What role does seed return play in the overall sustainability of a seed library?
3. Do seed libraries have a role in supporting good seed stewardship? What does that look like?

General Notes Across Breakout Rooms

- For many seed libraries, there are issues with seed return - e.g. borrowers never giving anything back, seeds of poorer quality being returned, lack of funds to supplement donations with purchased seeds
- Many libraries have a small number of members who are passionate seed savers and who constitute most of the returned seeds
- Many libraries rely on commercial seed companies to supply seeds each season
- Seed stewardship and education play a role in increasing quantity and quality of returns - e.g. involving kids, hosting events, setting up structured projects (community grow-outs, etc)

Resources:

- [FarmFolk CityFolk's Seed Library Work](#)
- Seeds of Diversity [Community Seed Libraries page](#) - inc. webinar from Calgary Seed Library and an e-bulletin series
- FFCF has a [handout about cross pollination](#) which is helpful for education
- [Community Seed Network](#) a strong resource for locating initiatives across Canada and the United States
- *Do you have other resources to share? Get in touch! rayna@seeds.ca*

Breakout Room #1

How/does seed return from patrons impact your seed collection? What challenges have you had? What role does seed return play in the overall sustainability of a seed library?

- One library sees very little return. They try to keep collections' expectations quite low. But they like the strategy of working with folks who can steward varieties. Finding those individuals who are really passionate helps. They try to tell folks not to get too carried away with too many varieties
- One coordinator indicated they struggle with donations. They don't come in at helpful times. People are showing up at Seedy Saturdays with seeds to donate, which is often 2 weeks too late to distribute it to the folks who need it.

- There are issues with funding. So poor seed return can be quite disruptive. This contributes to waxing and waning of seed availability.
- People donate uncleaned seed which isn't great because oftentimes, there isn't capacity to deal with that.
- For one, they get more and more seeds returned, but people aren't necessarily returning what they signed out, and the seed quality is not always great. For squash, for example, they don't know if they'll be true to type.
 - I.e. difficult to maintain varieties in the collection, as well as quality.
- One seed library struggles with return. The vast majority of their seeds are donations from West Coast Seeds. They've never gotten a seed back that they can guarantee is true to type.
 - They don't want to discourage people from returning seed but do want to be transparent about the quality of the returns.
- One organizer indicated they know a bunch of libraries and also seed swaps rely on West Coast Seeds and other larger companies; and/or from other organizations
 - E.g. Compost Council of Canada.
- One seed library has some members who are farmers and some folks who are reliably donating seeds. Another contingent of their membership is brand new gardeners & brand new seed savers.

Do seed libraries have a role in supporting good seed stewardship? What does that look like?

- One library has a community food commons (=a completely publicly accessible farm). They're able to grow out some crops on an acre of land. Some limitations but it's been very helpful. What gets grown there depends on who's running the space. Right now the space is used for multiple purposes.
- For some, the season is short. There is a lot of interest in locally adapted seeds in these communities.
 - One library: Someone brought some pepper seeds from Bhutan and they worked with that in a group of 4 or 5 and now have a well adapted Bhutanese pepper. They also have a lettuce that looks like a cross between 2 cultivars but it's pretty and tasty. They're not super concerned about maintaining a specific seed heritage through the library. They also have a local seed producer (within 25 kms) and they're talking to them about buying seeds (they have some funding) so that they can share them in the community. Most people only need or want 2 or 3 seeds for their garden, particularly with larger plants.
 - And some in unique eco-regions without a lot of access to native plant seed, including native food plants. Working to increase access to native plants.
- For many, their seed libraries are heavily utilized in the community
- One library currently offer 150 varieties, up from 80 in 2021

- One library - wants people who want free seeds and they have a group that's seriously into seed saving. They want someone to actually take care of the seed that they save and contribute.
- This fall, a library is doing a seed cleaning get together.
- Attendee: would like to find 12 people to do a grow out program to support seed return. So 12 people growing one pea variety and returning a cup of seed from their best plants. It would help with their minimum plant population/maintaining genetics.
- One indicated they want to steer people to grow well adapted plants simply because they'll grow better and be better supported by the environment
- The collections one attendee knows of are doing both company donations and member seed returns. Working with kids, seed saving education is more about the harvest process, rather than thinking about quality and education.
 - But, work with self-pollinators and a limited number of varieties that will cross. And they focus on the "why" of seed saving and seed adaptation.
- Being transparent about the varieties they carry, and that that supply will ebb and flow, is helpful. "If you want to see a crop or variety in the library, it would be really helpful for you to grow those seeds and bring them in!"
- For one, they have turned into more of a seed distribution centre. But a few members are staunch seed savers who will regularly return seed. During the pandemic they did Facebook Live events to connect with folks and the seed savers who are part of our library would participate in those.

For those in British Columbia...

- Connect with the FFCF Mobile Seed Cleaning Trailer
- The Food Infrastructure Grant (BC province) may include provision to fund seed cleaning equipment. Funding equipment is often much easier to get than to fund actual people to run the equipment and educate about it.
- BC Interior Savings Foundation Grant is another option
- If you're ever in Kamloops, find Eden Mackay

Breakout Room #2

How/does seed return from patrons impact your seed collection? What challenges have you had? What role does seed return play in the overall sustainability of a seed library?

- The local lions club gives one seed library initiative funding so they are able to purchase seeds eg: wildflower and pollinator mixes and vegetables
 - Some groups rely on funding to purchase seeds
 - Biggest cost is often the envelopes
- Some get lots of withdrawals but not so many returns
- Big question: How do we know if the seeds are viable?

Do seed libraries have a role in supporting good seed stewardship? What does that look like?

- Keeping seeds in the public domain is a role of seed libraries
- Offering them at a school for seed grow out projects
- Salsa workshop where they made salsa and showed seed saving
- Holding different events to encourage people to grow out seeds (eg: seed cleaning workshops)
- Bringing seeds for school groups to grow out sunflowers
- Building relationships with specific growers can be helpful

Breakout Room #3

How/does seed return from patrons impact your seed collection? What challenges have you had? What role does seed return play in the overall sustainability of a seed library?

- Seed library has minimal returns. Has tried designating growers, which sometimes works
 - 2025 plan involves seniors in seed stewardship via FarmFolk CityFolk.
- Farmers are often helpful with isolation distances but might be less willing to take part in seed library initiatives
- One organizer indicated they rely on donations from seed companies
 - A company gave them a box of hybrid seeds that they couldn't save, which is counterproductive.
 - Some seed companies are very generous with good seeds, but it's not sustainable to keep depending on them.
 - Sometimes, they inexpensive seeds but those tend to be mass market varieties, not the varieties that they would prefer to have and offer.
 - E.g. They have lots of calendula and marigold that are easy to save, but those aren't food-secure seeds.
- Comox seed group is very organized. People have designated seeds to return and as a group they do that.

Do seed libraries have a role in supporting good seed stewardship? What does that look like?

- If seeds are returned non-threshed, non-cleaned, one library has an event where people come together to sample tomatoes, squash, do workshops, and help clean the seeds.
- Similarly, another group has activities at farmers markets; involves youth in the process and attracts people from the public.
- Some wonder how to promote events where people can bring seeds after the growing season? How to connect that to peoples' desire to help local food security?

- Some have observed that engaging community is hard. Oftentimes, a handful of people are keen after an event, but they slip away over time and retention is a challenge.
- An interesting and important observation: Some people doing this work are doing so through a non-profit and paid, while some people are volunteering. It's a mix of paid and volunteer jobs, which can lead to differences in commitment, sustainability, and overall outcomes
- An interesting and important observation: There are two different types of seed libraries - those that distribute spare seeds to increase access and not to waste surpluses; and those that conserve or multiply particular varieties as a stewardship project. We call them both the same name, which is sometimes confusing or causes people to overlook the conservation aspect.

Next Up

We'll be in touch in the coming weeks with a survey for weighing in on what we should do next. Stay tuned!

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Do you have resources you're willing to add to a shared database, related to seed quality, education, return, and/or stewardship? We'd like to hear from you!