

Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library

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Introduction: The Importance of Seed Saving

Not so long ago it was common to serve meals from food grown in household gardens. These gardens were planted from seed saved from previous years; these seeds were grown-out and saved so many times that it passed from generation to generation, becoming family heirlooms. Seeds were planted for their hardiness; disease and pest resistance; abundance; beauty; and taste, with many varieties of each vegetable, fruit, herb and flower to choose from. Now, it is no longer common for families to keep gardens, as produce is readily available in stores. Seed saving is a skill that has vanished from most of our lives.

With the decline of personal agriculture and saving seeds, the variety in our diets has also diminished. While it may seem that grocery stores provide more variety than ever, our choices have actually become severely limited. For example, in grocery stores there is a choice between grape, cherry, Beefsteak or Roma tomatoes. However, we are missing out on the early season Bonny Bests; the dark, tangy Black Krim tomatoes, the abundant Moneymakers, the mottled Green Zebras, and the sweet, Tiny Tim cherry tomatoes.

The fact that there are over 5000 different varieties of tomatoes alone is due to the thousands of years people have spent saving seed; yet, we are rapidly losing this diversity (Morganelli, 2007, p. 24). Increasingly, those who garden rely on seed companies for their seeds. Because seed companies are businesses, they tend to offer only a narrow selection of commonplace seeds, with less popular varieties gradually disappearing from our catalogues, gardens, and memories.

Small seed companies are also disappearing as they are being purchased by larger companies. Many large seed companies are experimenting and creating genetically modified organisms by splicing genes from sometimes unrelated species and organisms with the genes of a plant (Kreipe, 2010, p. 3). These genetically modified organisms have been known to cross-pollinate with other plant species, causing many scientists to fear the unknown impacts of new species on both ecosystems and human health (Belcher et al., 2005, p. 388).

Growing food and saving seeds at the end of the harvest season are important steps in protecting the diversity of plant life on Earth. Protecting this diversity is necessary for many reasons. To begin with, each variety of plant evolves to have unique characteristics including differing levels of hardiness; disease and pest resistance; medicinal and nutritional qualities; as well as different timing and lengths of growing season (Howe & Brunner, 2005, p.1). Distinct traits such as these allow plants to be well adapted to their specific growing conditions, and in a changing climate, the ability to find plants adapted to one's regional conditions is vital (Howe & Brunner, 2005, p.1). Climate change could cause new pests or diseases to enter regions and kill plant species, and genetic diversity in seed provides the opportunity to create varieties that may be resistant to these new problems (Seed Savers Exchange, 2011, para. 2). Protecting diversity is also crucial because it fosters strong, adaptable, resilient ecosystems, and can provide opportunities to discover new medicines. And, of course, the ability to choose between a purple, flattened, tangy tomato versus a yellow, pear-shaped, sweet-tasting tomato is a joy worth preserving.

As public awareness toward the loss of plant diversity increases, many organizations are forming to promote gardening and seed saving in local communities. One example is the Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library located in Richmond, California.

Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library

The Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library (RGSLL) is a non-profit organization that was co-founded by Richmond native Rebecca Newburn, a teacher and permaculture educator, in May 2010 (RGSLL, 2012, About Us section). The RGSLL is located in the Richmond Public Library: a suitable location as a seed library follows the model of a public library. In a nutshell, the RGSLL provides varieties of seeds that are available for the public to borrow and grow in their own gardens.

To return seed, patrons must allow some plants to go to seed, which they can save and return to the library at the end of the harvest season. The process of borrowing, growing out, and returning seeds to the library establishes a source of seed that is adapted and resilient to the area's climate. Volunteers at the RGSLL provide skill-building workshops to teach community members how to save seed and a seed saving presentation garden outside the library adds to the learning environment. By teaching people how to save their own seed successfully, the RGSLL helps people become more self-sufficient. Additionally, by ensuring that all seeds returned to the library have been saved correctly, the RGSLL aims to ensure its own sustainability.

The structure of the seed lending library is simple. The library is made up of three cabinets that are categorized into ornamental plants, herbs, and edible plants sections (RGSLL, 2012, How to Use Library section). These categories are further separated into different difficulty levels, as some seeds are harder than others to save (RGSLL, 2012, How to Use Library section).

To borrow seeds, community members must first become seed library members by creating an online account name on a computer used for cataloguing and tracking purposes. Before members can take out seeds, they must attend an orientation session or watch the online

orientation video. Once completed, they are able to take out as many different kinds of seeds as they wish. The RGSLL recommends taking 2-3 seeds for every plant one wishes to grow and requires the patron to record the seed information on their envelope and in a computer to finish the transaction. At any time during the year, patrons may return seeds that have been saved or they can donate commercial seeds to the library. Patrons may take out seeds anytime during the public library hours, and can search www.richmondgrowsseeds.org for further information on seed saving, how the library works, upcoming workshops, and all resources needed to create a new seed lending library. (RGSLL, 2012, How to Use Library section).

Aspects of Capital the RGSLL Addresses

On its website, the RGSLL states that its mission is:

to increase the capacity of our community to feed itself wholesome food by being an accessible and free source of locally adapted plant seeds, supplied and cultivated by and for Richmond area residents. Richmond Grows celebrates biodiversity through the time-honored tradition of seed saving, nurtures locally-adapted plant varieties, and fosters community resilience, self-reliance, and a culture of sharing. We celebrate our human diversity through outreach and inclusion. (Mission section).

By making seed available to the community and teaching organic growing and seed saving practices, the Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library has the potential to enhance the well-being of people, the community, and the environment by working to increase natural, social, human and cultural capital.

Natural Capital

According to Jonathon Porritt (2007), author of *Capitalism as if the World Matters*, natural capital is defined as “any stock or flow of matter or energy from nature that yields valuable goods and services” (p. 139). The RGSLL works to enhance natural capital through

seed saving, which protects biodiversity through seed saving practices and promotes biodiversity by establishing a collection of seeds that become locally adapted to the Richmond area. The latter is made possible by the evolutionary process of natural selection. For example, if a gardener prefers a particular type of cucumber, they can grow out a few seeds of that plant and save the seeds from the plant that is most successful at the end of the season. If the process of growing and saving the seeds from the best plants is continued, the eventual result will be a cucumber plant that thrives in the conditions it was developed for.

Another way the RGSLL has the potential to enhance natural capital is through its promotion of organic gardening through free workshops for the public. Organic methods are much less harmful to the environment and gardening alone is beneficial as it provides habitats for birds and insects where a lawn would not. Increased biodiversity, even in a front or backyard, works to enhance natural capital.

Social Capital

Robert Putnam (1995), author of *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*, defines social capital as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 67). Social capital is enhanced by the RGSLL primarily through their efforts to bridge the organization to all members of the community. They do this by identifying who makes up their community and by solving barriers to participation. Also, the location of the RGSLL in the public library allows everyone to have access to the seed lending library and, through volunteerism, free workshops on gardening and seed saving are available to people regardless of financial situation. One of the main ways that the RGSLL succeeds in outreach and inclusion is by identifying the main ethnic groups in the

community and offering online videos and handouts in the most common languages. Currently, the RGSLL offers information in Spanish and Mandarin.

Human Capital

The free skill-building workshops and online resources provided by the RGSLL have a great deal of potential to enhance human capital in the Richmond community. Human capital is defined as “the health, knowledge, skills and motivation necessary to engage in productive work and community service, as well as an individual’s emotional and spiritual capacities and predispositions” (Porritt, 2007, p. 139). Free and accessible workshops provide opportunities for community members to gain the necessary skills and knowledge to grow healthy food and to save seeds. This information can build self-sufficiency and resilience in communities as, once learned, the knowledge can be passed on to other community members. The workshops can also help to build resiliency in communities by making it easier for people to grow their own food, increasing senses of possibility, and adding to the food security of the area.

Another significant way that the RGSLL aims to enhance human capital is by providing all of the information and guidance needed for other areas to start their own seed lending libraries. On the Richmond Grows website, one can find a step-by-step guide on how to start a seed lending library, as well as materials that the RGSLL provides (such as labels, organizational categories, and brochures) to reduce the need for others to start from scratch (RGSLL, 2012, Create a Library section). By making this information available, the RGSLL creates opportunities for growth in human capital beyond the borders of the city.

Cultural Capital

The RGSLL is a community-oriented organization as it was created for its community by its community. The seed lending library grows and strengthens from volunteers and from members borrowing then returning seeds. In this way, the RGSLL aims to build community, create a sense of place and represent community values. These goals all help to build cultural capital within Richmond. Cultural capital is the “unique cultural expression, built up over time, which is strengthened and enriched with each new contribution. These cultural contributions are wide-ranging, encompassing performing, visual, literary and media arts; library, archive, and heritage resources; and socio-cultural activities” (Duxbury & Pepper, 2006, p. 5). Cultural capital also includes traditional skills, values, and sense of place.

The RGSLL builds community by providing workshops, volunteer opportunities, and a place for people of like interests to meet and to share information and stories. This meeting place happens to be within an already existing public space, and the addition of the RGSLL to the Richmond Public Library gives people new reasons to visit the library, revitalizing the space and the notion of what constitutes a library.

The RGSLL aims to represent new and pre-existing community values such as sharing, self-sufficiency and community resilience. They do this by providing a venue that promotes sharing of knowledge, skills, and seed resources that can help the community become more self-reliant and resilient.

Finally, the RGSLL is a living library intended to improve each year as people continue to borrow, save and return seeds. Over time, these seeds become adapted to the region and can have a legacy that is connected to that particular area, as the seeds can be tracked year by year from person to person. Eventually, new varieties may be created that are rooted to the culture in which they originated.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the RGSLL Model

The Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library is a model with a variety of strengths, many of which come from its similarity to public libraries and its location within a library. By modelling after a public library, the seed lending library is accessible to the public and becomes a publically owned resource. This is important because many larger seed corporations are purchasing smaller seed companies and turning seed resources into private commodities. Community ownership of seed resources reinforces the idea that seeds are public property. The location of the RGSLL in a public library is a synergistic relationship: the public library provides a venue for the seed lending library, and the seed lending library revitalizes the library by offering new reasons for people to visit.

The concept of borrowing and returning seeds has great potential, because as plants in the library become locally adapted, the selection grows more diverse and resilient. The fact that seeds are grown out each year also means that there is always a stock of viable seed that continues to become adapted, resulting in a living collection. This model differs from a seed bank, as a seed bank keeps seed frozen to preserve their viability over extended periods of time; therefore, seed is rarely grown out and rarely given an opportunity to adapt to local conditions. Finally, providing free seed saving workshops is advantageous as it helps to ensure that seed that is returned to the library has been saved correctly. Free workshops build capacity within the community as people learn skills that they can pass on to others.

One weakness of the library approach to seed saving is that the RGSLL neither polices nor uses fining to support the system of returning seeds. Without these safeguards there is the possibility of a free rider effect where people take seed but do not return or donate any to the

library. This could be a problem regarding the sustainability of the RGSLL. In addition, while the RGSLL does provide education on seed saving, there is no way that they can ensure that the seed returned has been saved correctly or that it is not contaminated with disease.

Conclusion

At a time when communities have lost the ability to be self-sufficient and the biodiversity of our plant life is endangered, initiatives such as the Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library are becoming a necessity. Though there are weaknesses in its public library model, education and the building of shared community values is approached proactively through this initiative. The RGSLL attempts, and appears to succeed, in contributing to the vitality of the people and environment it serves. By providing an accessible learning environment and an important community resource, a seed library can help to restore our disappearing seed-saving culture.

Resources

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