



## Why Community Seed Banks?

Seed banks offer access to seed, education, and community. They're designed to play a long-term role in the community — safeguarding and stewarding our collective seed legacy season to season, generation to generation.

# How to organize a Community Seed Bank

## Where is your nearest seed bank?

(Hint: It probably isn't in an underground bunker on a frozen island off of Norway.)

**True, there are large national and international seed banks charged with ensuring that our collective seed legacy lives on for future generations. But seed security investments can also be made much closer to home — at your own local community seed bank. We hope that as you learn more, you'll agree that they provide a great return on your savings!**

Unlike their larger counterparts, community seed banks are less about long-term preservation and more about sharing seed season to season. For that reason they're sometimes called "seed libraries." No matter what they're called, the essence of all community seed banks is the same: they're a central place where seeds (often locally grown) are stored and shared with local growers. Most offer their seed for free because the philosophy behind community seed banks is that seed is not a commodity but a shared community resource.

Local seed banks serve as headquarters for saving the diversity of seeds that make up the foundation of resilient local food systems. These banks have several functions:

- Protect and highlight the value of heirlooms and locally adapted seed
- Educate communities on gardening, seed saving, and breeding for local needs
- Expand the **diversity of people** involved in seed stewardship

What are the benefits of starting a seed bank in your community?

- Preventing the loss of genetic diversity and the disappearance of local seed varieties
- Generating seed that is adapted to thrive in the soils and climate of your region
- Increasing access to seed for all, but especially for first-time, low-income, and community-based gardeners
- Educating your community on how to save seeds, and connecting them to our collective history of seed as a shared public resource
- Strengthening your local food system and increasing food security, starting with seeds
- Raising awareness and mobilizing actions around seed issues such as patenting and genetic engineering





# Planting the Seed— Developing Partnerships and Recruiting People

Community seed banks require a diverse pool of people with complementary skills, resources, and knowledge. You'll need skilled gardeners, hopefully a few veteran seed savers, and people who enjoy organizing and record keeping. But the most important person is the one who brings a passion for collaboration.

Look for helpers from other seed and garden projects in your community, such as people who have attended a seed swap or are part of a community garden. Also consider recruiting food and health advocates, community organizers, students, or information management/technology professionals whose skills align with your needs.

## Seek Partnerships

Partnerships can offer more than a venue for a community seed bank; they can unveil sources of funding, provide organizational systems for tracking the seeds and people involved, and help publicize the project by linking you to their network of contacts and clientele.

You'll likely need to expend extra effort to promote the vision of a community seed bank in the early stages of the project. Place signs or flyers around town to announce that a community seed bank is coming, and create a way for people to contact you if they want to participate. Consider hosting a seed swap to attract recruits. Posts on social media channels, ads in local news outlets, fliers at food co-ops, and emails can also help people spread the news that there is a great seed project happening in the community.

As you start to identify core organizers, consider forming committees or asking certain individuals to be responsible for the specific organizational needs of a community seed bank:

- Site selection and ongoing management
- Community access and/or membership systems
- Inventory management and tracking
- Volunteer coordination
- Education and communications about seed saving
- Accounting and fundraising

Keep in mind that no matter how many organizers or partners you find in the beginning, more people will want to help when they begin to see and understand the vision of having this incredible community resource.

### Groups to approach for partnership or support:

- Garden clubs
- Community organizations with similar goals like Slow Food or Transition Town
- Agriculture groups
- Churches
- School gardens
- Master gardeners
- Community garden groups
- Seed companies
- Nurseries



# Putting Down Roots —

## Establishing Structure, Site, and Seed Base

Once you have formed your core group of organizers, take time for the group to reflect on these and other questions that are central to your scope and operational structure:

- How will the group make decisions? Do you need centralized leadership?
- Will the seed bank be open to the public, or will participants need to become members and/or make any commitments to support the project?
- At what times (year, month, week, and times of day) will the inventory be accessible, and will volunteers be available to help when it requires care?
- Will all types of seed be accepted for the inventory? Will it be limited to seed grown by the participants, or will it also include seed from commercial or nonlocal sources?
- Does the group want to organize a seed grow-out program and set priorities for increasing the amount and quality of certain seeds?
- How much of a focus will you have on education about seed saving and what space or resources will this require?

### Site

The ideal site for a community seed bank will accommodate the needs of both seeds and people — it will provide adequate storage for the seed inventory and be accessible to the public. The best, driest storage spaces for seeds might not be the best, easiest places for people to access, so selecting a site can sometimes be a compromise. For example, the perfect seed storage climate of 50 degrees wouldn't be very inviting for people who want to browse through the inventory, learn about the seeds, or socialize with other patrons. Seeds last longer in ideal conditions, but long-term storage will not be a major issue because community seed banks distribute seed regularly and get new seed on a seasonal basis.

Here is a more complete list of considerations when selecting a site:

- **Accessibility.** Choose a site that is convenient for your community, where people will want to visit. Make sure there is enough space around the seed inventory for several people to be there at the same time. Try finding a space where groups can also gather for educational programs, social events, or instructional classes.
- **Climate.** Select a site where your inventory will stay dry and protected from weather — usually indoors with cool or at least stable temperatures. (See Section 3 for more information on climate and inventory management.)
- **Protection from pests.** Evaluate whether there is a risk of rodents, insects, or other animals causing damage to your seeds.
- **Cost.** It would be great if you can get the space for free via partnerships. If you are renting, you need to consider utility, insurance, and other monthly operating costs in your budget.
- **Additional storage.** Consider whether you need extra room for supplies like inventory records, seed saving books, and other materials. It also might help to have space to store seed donations until they are sorted, labeled, and ready to be offered to your patrons.

Consider planning your community seed bank in partnership with representatives of an existing organization that can offer a site:

- Book-lending libraries
- Churches
- Schools
- Parks, community gardens, or nature centers with buildings
- Community centers or other civic organizations that are open to the public
- Nonprofit organization offices

## Membership or Public Access

Many community seed banks ask participants to enroll as members before giving them access to the seeds. Membership can be as simple as taking down names and contact information, or more complex with membership fees, volunteer requirements, and record-keeping systems that track member activity. The extra steps for becoming a member can cultivate a more involved community of people who join. The more investment and interest, the more likely it will be that people save seeds and donate them to the inventory, not just take seeds away. And of course, even small membership fees provide community seed banks with funds to support operational costs.

Some community seed banks are open to all and do not require any form of membership, engagement, or volunteerism. This public model provides more people with greater access to seed, including new gardeners looking to get started and those not able to afford seed purchases. This model works especially well if you already have a strong group of people who are excited about seed saving and sharing their seed and skills. Both models have their advantages and disadvantages and can work for your community; it really depends on your goals, vision, and capacity.

## Hours of Operation

What days and times will the community seed bank be open to the public or its members? Will the seed inventory be available and accessible year-round?

Most community seed banks set regular times and days when the seed inventory is available. Others have more irregular schedules that are announced month-to-month, or that coincide with events or educational programs. Some may be open for only a few months in the winter and early spring, when people are acquiring seed.

The operating hours of community seed banks that are independently housed (not in a shared public building) will hinge on the availability and willingness of volunteers. Community seed banks that are located in libraries or other public buildings typically are open whenever the building is accessible by the public. Librarians or other volunteers might be willing to help with the seed inventory or at least direct people to where it is located. Remember, if there isn't someone staffing the community seed bank at all times, be sure to leave signs with instructions for getting involved.

## Free Seed — Are we really giving it away?

Many community seed banks offer their seed free of charge but may have a nominal membership fee. Why? On a practical level, most plants produce such abundant quantities of seeds that the individual seed saver cannot possibly use them all. One goal of community building is to create a “sharing economy,” where members share rather than sell their excess. At Seed Matters, we believe seed is a natural resource best maintained as a public commons — not a commodity — and that such resources should be accessible to all.



## Budget and Funding

Rent and utilities are usually the largest ongoing expense; so again, consider partnering with an existing business or public service organization. There will be smaller ongoing costs of supplies, such as envelopes, but otherwise the costs are relatively low. You may be able to cover many of the costs with a membership fee or donation program, but you can also approach local businesses like a food co-op or other green businesses for financial sponsorship. When you approach them, be sure to mention how you will recognize them at the seed bank and/or in your website, emails, or other media. Grants may be available but are often restricted to seed banks that have a nonprofit status or nonprofit financial administrator.

## Initial Seed Inventory

Your goals and the community you serve will determine the type of seed you offer in your inventory. If the main goal is to support local gardening, then you may be open to any and all seed donations. If the idea is to create a locally grown seed inventory to promote community resilience, you may decide on only open-pollinated, organic, and locally saved seed. Bring your core organizational team together to discuss your goals, and then post your guidelines so that patrons and those donating seed can clearly understand the scope of your project.

In the beginning, ask for donations of seed from local seed savers, gardeners, or local seed companies. Be sure to specify the seed types you seek. Remember that you don't want to save seed from hybrids since they will not grow true to type. If you get donations of hybrid seed, keep them labeled "not for seed saving."





# Sprouting —

## Caring for Your Inventory and Making It Grow

It's important that the seed in your inventory is checked for quality and pulled if there are problems. As a community resource, your seed bank has a responsibility to share healthy seed, not seed that is diseased, that lacks in germination or vigor, or that is mislabeled. You'll get the best results by teaching your patrons how to take care of the seed and how to grow high-quality seed. You can put systems and procedures in place to help people take and add seed in a way that ensures your inventory remains organized and full of healthy, viable seed.

Organize your inventory so that it's simple to understand and patrons can easily search the contents without assistance from a volunteer. Decide how patrons will collect the seed and whether you will control the amount they take. People could help themselves to preportioned packs of seeds, or they could scoop from a bulk container, adhering to a trust system that encourages them to take only what they need. Consider how much seed there is, how simple a system you want, and how easy it should be to find particular varieties.

Following are some tips for organizing and storing seed:

- **Categories.** Separate seeds into sections:

- › Crop "type," such as flower, fruit, grain, grass, herb, vegetable, and misc. Sort alphabetically within each type.
- › Plant family, such as the Brassica, Cucurbit, or Solanaceae families. Sort alphabetically and/or by subcategories (for example, grouping tomatoes separately from their solanaceous cousins peppers and eggplants).
- › Ease of seed saving. Divide varieties into sections that vary in level of difficulty. Some seeds are easier to save from plants than others are.

- **Seed storage containers.** Glass jars, paper envelopes, bags, and plastic containers each have advantages and disadvantages. Tightly sealed glass jars are excellent for protecting seeds from humidity and pests, but they are breakable. Envelopes are compact and easy to browse, but they are more susceptible to damage from moisture and pests (rodents can chew through bags and plastic containers).

- **Storage space.** Display your seed inventory in bookshelves, dressers, or file cabinets, or in another, creative location (suitcases, library card catalogs). Choose a space that will catch people's eyes and make the seeds stand out! The best displays allow for well-labeled containers that people can browse through easily, and they will also keep seeds safe from pests (metal filing cabinets are usually rodent-proof).

### LABELS

Mark all seed containers clearly with these key details:

Common name and variety

Latin name

Year harvested

Garden location

Seed grower

Isolation from cross-pollination

Number of plants that seed was collected from

Notes on selection for health or vigor

Description of the plant

Date entered into the community seed bank's records

Following are some tips on storing for longevity:

- Hang an insulated curtain over your inventory to protect it from heat and light; this works especially well for a bookshelf.
- Place the inventory far from any heat source.
- Put a dehumidifier in the space and try to keep humidity at 40–50 percent.
- Place seeds in a freezer or refrigerator for more long-term storage (but don't take seed in and out of such spaces regularly, because they often develop condensation going from cool to warm and moisture can hurt their germination rate).

## Maintaining Inventory

Some community seed banks store seeds for just a short time — a few years, or even the few months between when the seeds are harvested and when they are ready to plant again. Others store seeds for longer periods. For example, if your collection includes limited seed of a rare or endangered variety, it's good to keep "foundation seed," which you don't distribute and use only in limited amounts to regrow the next year's seed crop (but not all of it, in case the crop fails).

For longer storage, you need to create a space that is "Cool-Dry-Dark!" — the three optimal storage conditions for seed. (One note about "Dry": some seed savers add silica packs or other drying agents to the drawers or boxes containing seeds, but be careful since you can overdry seeds and cause them to crack and die.)

## Keeping Records

Establish a recording and tracking system that can alert you to which varieties are most popular and which are low in stock and in need of grow-outs the next season. Your records will provide information as to who is utilizing the seed bank and how it's being used, and they will help you assess whether you need to limit the amount of seed people take and which seed donations you need.

- **Incoming seed.** Adding seed to your inventory is an ongoing necessity, and ensuring that it is quality seed with accurate information requires a good system. A host or librarian might accept seed and information from a donor and take responsibility for packaging and labeling it and entering it into inventory. Alternately, you might simply ask donors to place seed in specific types of containers and record their donations in an inventory ledger. In this case, give clear instructions and use signs asking donors to provide detailed information reflecting your specific labeling system, as well as weights/volume and any home germination rates they may have.

Consider a short training for first-time donors — walk them through your system, explaining which seeds you accept and the protocol for donations. After this preliminary training, donors can drop off seeds whether a volunteer is present or not. If you have the volunteers and capacity, you may even want to establish germination requirements for donated seed.

- **Outgoing seed.** A system for tracking seed distribution can help keep your inventory up to date. Asking patrons to record the types and amounts of seed they take can alert you to the varieties that are most popular, and which might be running low so that you can replenish them. Either a paper- or computer-based tracking system can work.

## Discarding Seeds

It's a good idea to go through the seed in your inventory at least once a year and throw out anything that is too old, is poorly labeled, or has bugs or mold in it. If you're able, perform germination tests on your inventory. When a seed becomes "too old" depends on its type (refer to the Seed Matters Seed Saving Chart for more information on seed longevity) and how it has been stored. Some banks keep seed that is older or has a low germination rate, and they suggest that their patrons account for the decreased "germ rate" by seeding more densely (three or four seeds in a hole instead of one or two). You have a responsibility to inform gardeners of older seed or seed with questionable germination. Frustrated patrons who plant dead seed and miss a gardening season won't be big promoters of community seed.

Germination testing is a science. You could spend thousands of dollars on germination chambers, books, and certifications. However, most community projects require simpler options that give you a good estimate of your germination rates. Here are the basic steps:

- Place 20–30 seeds in rows on a moist paper towel, fold in half or cover with another moist towel, and place in a sealed plastic bag.
- Label the bag with name and date and place it in a warm spot.
- After three days, check the seeds daily. Watch for sprouts and moisten the towel with a spray bottle if it is drying out.
- After the normal number of days to germinate that seed (most take less than eight days), determine the number of seeds that germinated — if there are 20 seeds and only 10 sprouted, your germ rate is 50 percent.
- If the germination rate is below 75 percent, let your patrons know that they might want to plant the seeds more densely. Seeds with a germination rate of less than 50 percent are probably not worth keeping in inventory.

## Ongoing Participation of Your Patrons and Volunteers

As new people sign up for your seed bank, they will look to you or your organizing team for guidance on how to be involved. Have a system in place that explains their roles in maintaining the seed inventory. Create a Facebook page or website, send out emails, or make announcements in your community to regularly update people on what’s happening with the project and how they can help.

- **Plan orientations.** Arrange times when new patrons can come learn about the community seed bank: the vision of the project, how they can use the seed inventory, basic information on seed saving, and what is expected of them. Offer handouts with more details, and let them know where they can find additional information (including where instructions are located on-site).
- **Assign duties or responsibilities.** Decide whether patrons must work a certain number of hours or whether their help is entirely voluntary. Either way, create a system that clearly indicates responsibilities, prioritizes tasks, provides clear instructions, and indicates if special training or supervision is required. Some community seed banks have a seed host or seed librarian who helps keep volunteers engaged and feeling useful. A variety of regular tasks could be assigned:
  - › Cleaning the space
  - › Organizing the inventory
  - › Repackaging seeds
  - › Updating inventory records
  - › Making signs
  - › Printing labels and handouts
  - › Gathering and replenishing supplies
  - › Updating membership records
  - › Writing blogs or social media posts
  - › Teaching classes
- **Create a schedule/calendar.** Make a public calendar and ask people to sign up for shifts. Clarify when a host will be present. A work schedule is especially important if your community seed bank needs someone on-site at all times or if certain events need to be staffed, such as a supervised “kids hour,” orientation, or educational program. Find out when your volunteers can come together as a group for training or work parties, which can make tasks easier and more fun.



## Encourage Seed Saving and Sharing

Many community seed banks discover, during their early years, that people tend to take seeds without adding any. All banks require deposits and savings if they're going to help others in need. Overcoming this issue can be the most rewarding part of your project; teach people the techniques and importance of saving seeds so they can choose to take a more active role in your local seed system. One day, you'll have a group of seed savers who make the effort to return seed every year, increasing your community's seed capital.

- **Teach people how to save seeds.** Communities have seed savers with all levels of experience — the trick is bringing together the beginners and the experts.
  - › Schedule classes and workshops.
  - › Start a mentorship program that matches the next generation of seed savers with mentors who can give one-on-one instruction.
  - › Offer books and informational materials about seed saving.
  - › Demonstrate seed saving in spaces outside the community seed bank, such as at a community seed garden or the garden of an active seed saver.
- **Give people incentives to return seeds.** Learning about the importance of local, sustainable, community-based seed systems might be all it takes for a community to get more involved in saving seeds. However, incentives can help too.
  - › Allow people who add seeds to take more seeds from your inventory, or give them first pick of new seeds.
  - › Require people to commit to saving seeds as a condition of using the community seed bank.
  - › Offer prizes to people who return seeds, just as a lending library might offer prizes to kids who read books in the summer (ask for donations of coupons, tickets, or gift certificates from local businesses).
- **Start a seed grow-out program.** A grow-out program usually is organized by people who want to increase the amount of specific varieties of seed in their community. Maybe a variety is at risk of disappearing from your inventory, or maybe it's so popular that your community is asking for more. You might be surprised to see how eager people are to participate in a formal program knowing that they have a concrete goal to generate highly valued seed.

A grow-out program can focus people's efforts, assure them that their hard work will be appreciated, and perhaps even determine whether a variety is lost or lasts in your community. You can develop an individual grower program, or consider starting a dedicated community seed garden (see the Seed Matters How to Create a Community Seed Garden resource). It will take time to determine if you need such a program and how to manage it, but here are the key steps:

- 1) Meet with the seed savers in your group and prioritize inventory needs based on volume and popularity of varieties.
- 2) Determine which growers are best able to produce certain crops/varieties (for example, do they have room for crops that require larger populations?).
- 3) Make sure that a person's skill level matches the skill required for saving the seed they are assigned, or consider matching new seed savers with a mentor to give them guidance throughout the growing season.
- 4) Keep records of who has committed to grow which variety, and be clear about what is expected from each grower.
- 5) Ask growers to check in midseason and communicate how the crop looks, or to inform the group of crop failures so you can consider other options for adding to your seed inventory.



## Transplanting — Spreading the Seeds and Success

Each year, a community seed bank completes the cycle of growing, gathering, and sharing seed, and it generates knowledge that's worth spreading. As a local seed repository and as an example of a successful community project, your seed bank can help many different people, including organizers in other locations. Be sure to publicize your community's experience of sharing seeds, and always look for ways your seeds could do more good.

- Give some seed to other local projects that would benefit from it, such as school gardens or community gardens. Offer to help them integrate seed saving in their gardens, or use their gardens as venues for teaching seed-saving techniques.
- Take seeds to farmers markets, flower shows, garden tours, or other events where you can publicize your project and pass out seeds to more people in the community.
- Contact journalists or bloggers who would be interested in writing about your project. Create a press release, or send emails to introduce the exciting work you're doing.
- Be a model for other community seed banks — share photos, stories, or tips about what makes your project work. Connect with the growing network of seed-saving groups by creating a Facebook page or building a website. Your seed bank might inspire someone else to set up a complementary project in your community, or to replicate your project somewhere far away. Let the whole world know!
- Be sure to contact us at Seed Matters and share your stories. Place your project on our online map so that others can find you and we can promote your work. Add your seed stories to the history of seed saving that we all share.



# notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.



For more information on the Community Seed Resource Program, contact Shea Conlan, Education and Outreach Coordinator at Seed Savers Exchange

PHONE: 563.387.5624

EMAIL: [communityseed@seedsavers.org](mailto:communityseed@seedsavers.org)

WEB: [seedsavers.org/csrp](http://seedsavers.org/csrp)

MAILING ADDRESS:

3094 North Winn Rd  
Decorah IA 52101

A Clif Bar Family  
Foundation Initiative



**CLIF BAR FAMILY**  
FOUNDATION



**SOW MORE GOOD™**

For more seed saving resources, visit [seedsavers.org/learn](http://seedsavers.org/learn)