

Octavia Fellin Public Library's Seed Lending Library sows seeds for local plant preservation

Written by By Rachelle Nones Sun Correspondent
Friday, 03 December 2021 05:12



Gallup's Octavia Fellin Public Library is one of New Mexico's numerous seed libraries distributing fruit, vegetable, and flower seeds to participating gardeners. One does not have to possess a library card to check out seeds.

"It will encourage, hopefully, more gardeners and they will start turning in more seeds, more heirloom seeds," OFPL Deputy Director Betty Martin said.

What is a seed lending library? Seed lending libraries stock collections of seeds that are shared, traded, and lent to gardeners. A beneficial long-term effect of seed libraries is the preservation of heirloom and quality seeds that have adapted to the climate, plant diseases, and insects within a local region. After borrowed seeds are harvested at the end of the growing season, gardeners who have borrowed seeds from OFPL's seed library are encouraged to return harvested seeds to the library, following OFPL's guidelines regarding seed saving techniques and proper labeling.

"We do ask that whoever harvests the seeds ... try to contribute one third of their total harvest, even a quarter would be fine, too," OFPL Experiential Learning Coordinator Joshua Whitman said. "That way we can keep the seed library going."

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Since the seed lending library program launched in 2020, library visitors have been combing through seed packets catalogued in alphabetical order within card catalog containers located in the main library. The seed inventory includes cilantro, thyme, sunflower and poppy seeds, Navajo tea, Cherokee Purple heirloom tomatoes, squash, red kidney beans, blue corn, and other vegetable, flower, and herb seeds.

"Typically, we try our very best to get organic seeds to make sure that they don't require special care or special plantings with pesticides," Whitman explained.

Whitman said the library tries to obtain some of its seed supply from local farmers. OFPL Library Supervisor Johnson Bordy contributed heirloom Indian corn and squash seeds from his family's garden and the Community Pantry has also donated seeds to OFPL's collection.

"Last harvest season and then this harvest season we got a donation from the Community Pantry of their latest harvest," Whitman said. "We have four half boxes of seeds that I asked my colleagues to go through and inventory."

Which crops are best for inexperienced gardeners to start with? Martin recommends that novice gardeners plant a Three Sisters Garden featuring the three pillars of traditional Indigenous North American crops: squash, corn, and climbing beans. For the past two years, the library has planted its own garden.

"It's gone now," Martin said. "But there were big, tall, huge corn stalks out there. It was really cool. "

During the 2020 COVID lockdown, the library had given away a lot of seeds.

"I'm assuming that a lot of people were gardening that year because there was nothing else to do," Martin said.

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To meet the demand during the library's lockdown, OFPL offered curbside pick-up for seed orders placed on OFPL's website.

Future plans for the seed lending library include marketing its availability via print publications and "Library Minute" radio promotions because Martin believes "a lot of people don't know about it yet."

Details about the Octavia Fellin Seed Library are available here: <https://ofpl.online/seed-library/#mission>

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