

Researching the Implementation of an Academic Seed Library at Carleton University

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Seed libraries are important community-based institutions that have proliferated globally – ‘lending’ seeds to countless gardeners. Patrons are expected to grow the plants and return the seeds produced from that generation of plants to replenish the library. These institutions often partner with local libraries to facilitate gardening education, seed access, food security, environmental stewardship, and community building. While seed libraries have existed since the early 2000s, there has been a lack of research done on their impacts, implementation, and design. Nonetheless, the hundreds of seed libraries established indicates the value that these institutions bring to their communities. This CUROP research-action project addresses this lack of research through an environmental scan, literature review, and preliminary, informal scoping interviews with the goal of implementing a well-informed, sustainable seed library at Carleton University and connecting seed librarians through an online chat group. If broadened and published, this research would not only be beneficial in addressing the needs of Carleton’s local community but also the hundreds of communities involved with seed libraries. In addition, it could potentially lead to the successful installation of more of these institutions. Installing a seed library at Carleton University is especially significant given several factors. First, Ottawa has only one existing, easy to locate, community-scale seed library and it only carries local wildflower seeds. Second, as a university, Carleton is already an established community hub with plenty of resources. Finally, a seed library’s goals align and work well within Carleton’s institutional framework, highlighting Carleton’s mission to educate and serve its broader community for the greater good of society.

In this study, seed librarians from four Canadian academic institutions were interviewed as well as a few seed librarians who have developed exemplary community-based seed libraries. These informal interviews explored success factors, constraints and challenges, costs and resources, circulation and return policies, social, ecological, and educational impacts, engagement with equity-deserving groups, and future research needs. I also reached out to a few local seed farmers to find out how farmers could best work within seed library networks and more specifically invite them to work and partner with Carleton’s seed library.

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of embedding the seed library within a broader community network. A vision for a fully cyclical and self-replenishing seed library was often expressed by both the seed librarians and seed farmers although was only actualized by a few seed libraries with dedicated seed saving patrons. The most widely reported challenges for both seed farmers and seed librarians were time and financial limitations which were partially solved by frugality/resourcefulness, acquiring committed volunteers, accessing institutional support, and scaling the operation proportionally. Insights gleaned from these conversations have influenced how I will approach the implementation of Carleton’s seed library, and how it will be set up for its grand opening in January 2026.