Cleveland Seed Bank: Seed Library Program

End of year 2020 report

Overview
Across the country, people are reclaiming seed as a public resource for local communities. We at the Cleveland Seed Bank provide Seed Libraries to reconnect people with their food, to promote active, healthy lifestyles and to serve as stewards of biodiversity. We began offering organically grown, open-pollinated seeds through the public libraries in 2013, and since then we have partnered with 6 library systems in 3 different counties to host over a dozen Seed Libraries in Northeast Ohio.

There are few things this year that were not affected by the pandemic. Our Seed Libraries were scheduled to open in March during the same week that all libraries closed to the public. Just as seeds are a vital link in the broad-reaching food web, the Seed Library Program felt the strain of public library closures, regional seed crop failures, and a sweeping increase in virtualization.

The Cleveland Seed Bank quickly adapted to the ever-changing circumstances and transformed the program into a virtual model. In early May, we opened a virtual Seed Library and accepted requests through an online form and mailed seed packets to individuals’ homes. We are proud to say that the program remained vibrant, matching similar request volumes from previous years, and we have learned some valuable lessons that we will carry forward into future years.

Our Reach

| 20 weeks | 1,120 people | 6,462 seed packets |

Between May 6th and September 20th, the Seed Library Program reached 1,120 people distributing almost 6,500 seed packets! 80% of participants were in Cuyahoga county; most others were elsewhere in Geauga, Lake and Lorain counties. This past year, 80% of the requesters were women, 75% white, and 75% over the age of 36, which is much less diverse than last year’s in-person library program. We hope to return to non-virtual distribution as soon as next year, otherwise we will have to find more ways to reach young folks, men, and people of color with our virtualized model. This could be through the library system itself, or partnering with other organizations who have broader reach throughout Cleveland.
**Our Seeds**

The most commonly requested seeds were Lemon Queen Sunflower and Genovese Basil, followed by spinach, zucchini, lettuce, snap peas and milkweed. The least requested varieties were cabbage and paste tomato, but that is solely because we ran out of stock of these seeds so early in the year. Even though we attempted to buy more of each, paste tomatoes were delayed into the summer due to the high demand and cabbage seed could not be replaced due to a seed crop failure the year before.

Due to the pandemic, seed companies across the country sold out of many seed varieties during increased purchases in March and April 2020. Regular buyers of seed had trouble acquiring commonly purchased seed from their normal suppliers, including the Cleveland Seed Bank. Our truly least-requested varieties, as they remained in stock all season, were shell peas and radishes.

As we look at seed availability for 2021, we learned that our cabbage variety was not the only crop failure last year. Five of our regular seed varieties including the Lemon Queen Sunflower, our most popular variety, suffered a crop failure last year and the seed company is removing these varieties from their catalog. We worked diligently with the team at High Mowing Organic Seeds to choose five new replacement varieties which we are excited to introduce next year.

**Our Plan for 2021**

Nobody can know what the future holds, but we can be hopeful and plan for several ways next year might look. Our most optimistic scenario is that most library branches will remain open in March 2021 and we will be able to distribute Seed Libraries to sponsored locations. If libraries return to a closed state, we will reconsider the virtual mailing program and lean into our partner librarians for support. Sponsorship makes it all possible, and we hope that you or a local business in your area will help us continue to grow this program throughout northeast Ohio with your help. To donate or sponsor a Seed Library, please visit our website at [www.clevelandseedbank.org](http://www.clevelandseedbank.org) and click the donate button.