

Over the past six months, I have taken a journey to understand the special role of seeds in our food system. Although they sit at the foundation of life, the socio-political, economic and ecological meaning of seed is most often rendered invisible in the way we engage with to our food. I spent a month in the Bay Area interviewing seed savers and library managers, learning how to save seeds, collecting stories about seeds, visiting gardens and seed libraries, and going on mural walks searching for artistic representations of seeds.

Humans have sowed, saved, and shared them to adapt to local climate conditions, strengthen yields, and, of course, influence taste, but this freedom is increasingly under threat. Legal and policy arenas in the last half a century having to do with seed patenting laws and intellectual property rights regimes have created a framework under which plant genetic resources can be owned, commercialized, and controlled by giant corporations. Four multinational corporations that now over 60 percent of the global proprietary seed market. These four companies are also some of the largest agrochemical producers in the world, representing over 70% of the global pesticide market. Just one of the many impacts of this corporate consolidation is the rapid loss of biodiversity. An estimated 75% of all crop plant varieties were lost in the 20th century.

Motivated to conserve biodiversity in an increasingly uncertain climate future, as well as to protect the accompanying cultural and spiritual relationships humans maintain with plants, communities all over the world have risen up to demand seed sovereignty. As a part of this growing movement, seed libraries have sprouted up in neighborhoods across the U.S, there are now over 650 of these initiatives. While California proudly claims many identities, some of the strongest are the state's unique relationship to agriculture and food culture and, naturally, seeds, which contain the history, present, and future of a place, must form the crucial foundation for these identities.

The first seed library in the US, the Bay Area Seed Interchange Library (BASIL) is located at the Ecology Center in Berkeley, California and in the past decade over 100 seed libraries, predominantly located within community public library branches, have opened in the state. By providing access to a locally adapted seed stock, seed libraries provide a grassroots way for communities to resist the widespread homogenization of biology and culture promoted by the industrial food system. Unlike commercial seed companies which are more likely to sell seeds that produce consistent results in any growing conditions, community seed initiatives are heavily tied to the idea of place. Seed libraries preserve and protect varieties that grow well in the conditions specific to a community – which means taking into account the micro-climate of place as well as social and cultural identities of place. The identity of place is particularly important in the areas of foggy Northern California where climate, sun exposure, soil conditions, and other influences on gardening conditions varies wildly not just from town to town but can vary from neighborhood to neighborhood - the same plant that grows well in the Mission may not succeed as well in Sunset but not. Seed savers tended to describe their local community as much in terms of micro-climate and ecological boundaries than they did according to socio-political bounds.

When seeds are stewarded from year to year, growers can select the plants that have survived in changing climate condition and steadily build local resilience. Growers are intensely aware and motivated by these fears as California's farms and home gardens become ever hotter and drier, which was reflected in many of the conversation I had with California seed savers. "The weather is changing," noted Liz at the Community Seed Saver Exchange in Sebastopol. "Going forward we are going having to learn to dance with that more and more." Rebecca at the Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library noted that fires, which have increasingly become an

urban reality, pose a mounting challenge for seed collectors: “We are thinking about how to back up our collection. One of my friends is an amazing seed saver in West County and her house burned down in the Santa Rosa fires and she lost her whole collection. Fortunately, she is part of a generous community of seed savers, so she didn’t lose everything.”

I found myself studying the role of seed saving libraries specifically in the San Francisco Bay Area because the region is an urban geography broadly known for its diverse, and oft-contested, landscape of food culture. From San Francisco’s “foodie culture” and Berkeley’s reputation as the birthplace of farm-to-table dining and the home of local food champion Alice Water’s Chez Panisse, to Oakland’s more radical legacy of food justice activism as the home of the Black Panthers’ free breakfast program, racial and ethnic food practices are at once celebrated, erased, and appropriated in the mainstream in the Bay.