How to Begin a Community Seed Bank

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Community Seed Bank

Definition and Benefits of a Community Seed Bank

A Community Seed Bank is a central place where local diverse seeds are kept and shared. They provide seeds to growers in the community.

A Community Seed Bank is normally created for several different reasons. Saving local seed varieties protects the region's diverse selection of seeds accustomed to growing in the region's soil. They provide education to growers on how to select and store seeds. Seed banks also provide to those in the community in need and provide people with greater food security.

Steps

Step 1: Find People to Join

Step 2: Seed Bank Organization

Step 3: Site Selection and Seed Saving

Step 4: Education

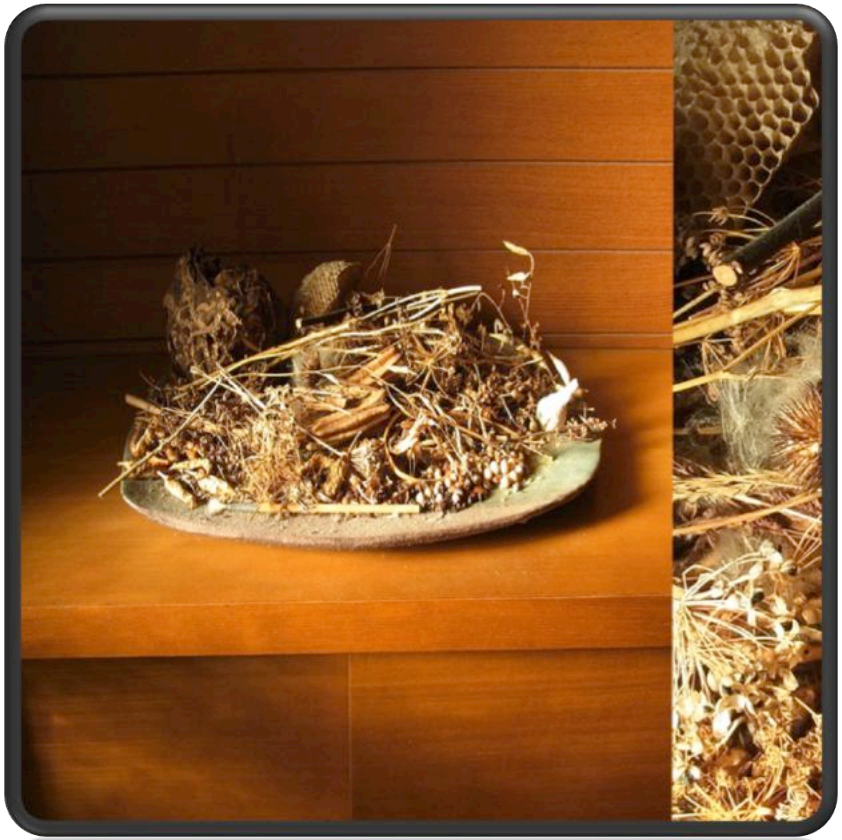
Step 5: Maintaining Your Seed Bank

Incorporate Cultural Techniques and Wisdom

Step 1: Find People to Join

Find people with gardening skills, record keeping abilities, and if at all possible seed saving experience. Advertise the seed bank around town to find people who want to become involved. Try to find partners that can help raise or donate money and resources for your project. Groups can include seed banks, nurseries, gardeners, churches, school gardens, and non-profits or community organizations.

Step 2: Bank Organization



Once you have a group of people working with the project, discuss and make decisions on how to run the seed bank.

Free Membership

Take down names and contact information if available. Free membership makes it so more people can plant seeds whether they can afford it or not.

Membership Charge

Even a very small charge will increase the chance that people will save their seed for the next season or that people will donate seed to the bank and not just remove them.

Hours

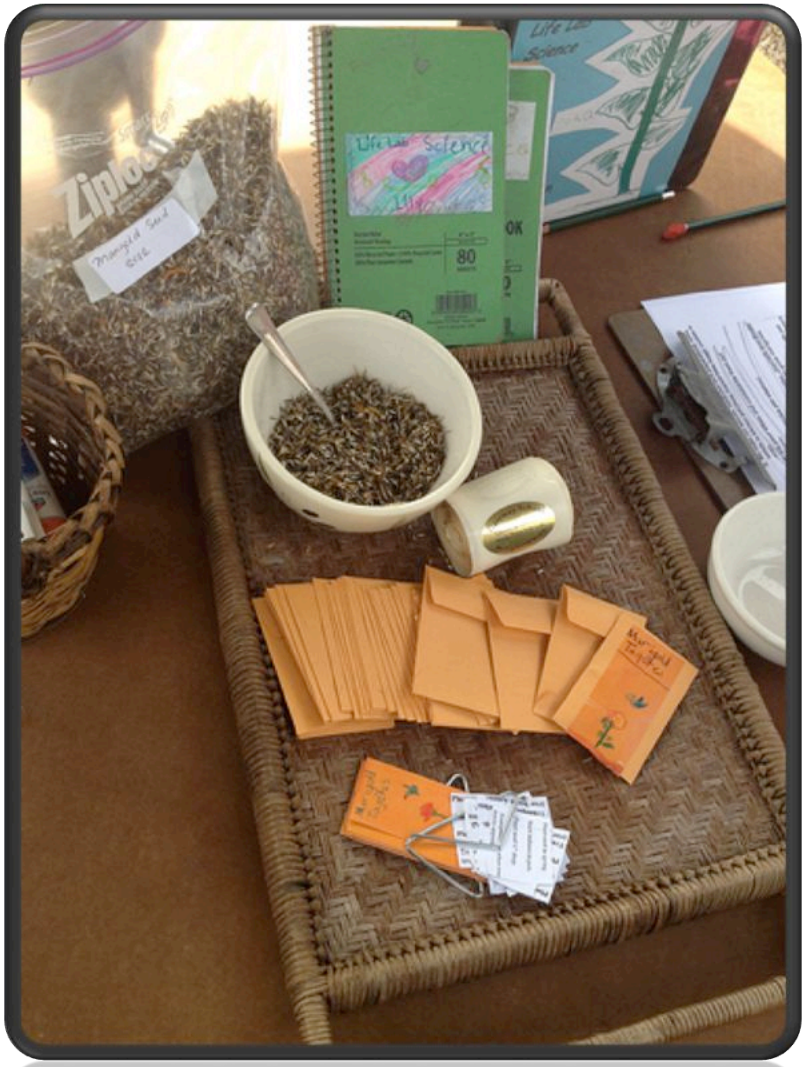
The next decisions to make are which months, days of the week, and hours the seed bank will be open to the public or its members. Some are open only during the time of year when people are buying seed to grow, others have hours based upon when the building they're using is open. Decide based upon your building, volunteer availability, and your community's needs.

Budget

Rent and utilities typically cost the most when maintaining a seed bank which is why using a free space in a public building or existing business is one of the best options. You should be able to pay other costs with your small membership fees or with donations. You can also try to get donations or a site from businesses or non-profits that would support your cause.

Options include: Libraries, Churches, Schools, Community Gardens/Nature Centers with buildings, Community Centers/Civic Organizations which are open to the public, Nonprofit offices.

Step 3: Site Selection and Seed Saving



Your site should be located somewhere central or a place that is close or convenient to most of the people in your community. A site with enough room for people to meet, for classes, and space for supplies and donations, is beneficial.
A place which is dry, with cool or stable temperatures and protected from the weather is important for storing seeds.
Make sure you can keep rodents, insects, or other animals away from your seeds.

Seeds

Typically open-pollinated, organic, and locally saved seeds are the best choices. Your guidelines will be based on the needs of your community. Post your guidelines so that those donating in the beginning will know which seeds to bring in. Seed savers, gardeners, and companies selling local seed are the best places to get donations since they are experienced. Use only non-GMO seeds partly because of patents and don't use hybrid seeds for saving since they won't grow the same as before. Saving local varieties will cause plants to be less susceptible to drastic weather conditions and pests. Make sure that seeds coming in aren't cross pollinated. Educate those who are bringing in seeds on how to avoid cross pollination. Distance or growing plants which aren't in the same family can easily avoid this. Train seed donators to save seeds from strong plants and from a minimum number of plants to prevent inbreeding and lack of biodiversity.

Maintaining your Seeds

Place your seeds in a way that allows customers to search without help. Decide whether you want customers to take a set amount which you measure and package for them or have them scoop from a bulk container. Either way they should take only what they need.

Set seeds on bookshelves, dressers, file cabinets, or anything you have available which will display your containers.

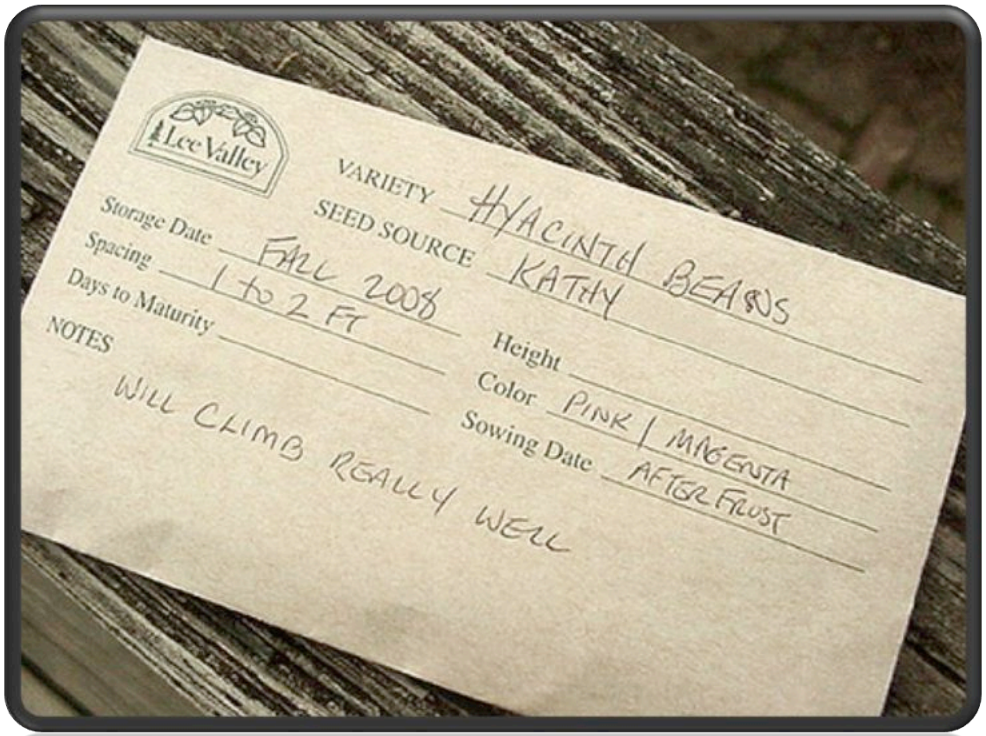
Display and Storage

Separate seeds into any of these categories:

- Crop type like grain, grass, vegetable
- Ease of saving
- Plant family

Seed storage containers can include glass jars, paper envelopes, bags, plastic containers, clay pots and gourds.

Labels



Mark Containers with: Common Name & Variety
Latin Name
Year Harvested
Garden Location
Seed Grower
Isolation from Cross-Pollination
Number of Plants that Seed is From
Notes on Selection for Health or Vigor
Description of the plant
Date Entered into Seed Bank's Records

Step 4: Education

In order to receive healthy, viable seeds back from members, offering education and training is important.

Plan orientations when members first join to familiarize them with how the bank works and its standards.

Assign projects to volunteers according to experience levels. Evaluate which tasks require training or supervision.

Tasks can include: Cleaning, organization, repackaging seeds, inventory record keeping, making signs and labels, finding supplies, teaching classes.

Post a calendar where volunteers/members can sign up for projects.

When most of the members are available have group training/ work parties to make them more enjoyable.

One way to keep up your seed supply is to ask growers who take seeds to save the seeds from the plants they grow that season. Incentives for bringing in seeds could include those who bring seeds in can either take more or choose their seeds first.

Step 5: Maintaining Your Seed Bank

Record Keeping

Record keeping will keep track of inventory and which seeds you need to have people save the following season.

Seed donations can be dropped off if instructions are posted. Donation records should include label details. Additional details you may want them to include: the date planted, how many days and how many of the seeds sprouted, were they all strong, when they flowered, when they were harvested and the flavor.

Tracking and recording the seeds which people take can keep you updated on your need/inventory.

Germination

In order to test germination place 20-30 seeds in rows on a moist paper towel and cover. Place them in a sealed plastic bag in a warm spot and label with their name and date. In a few days check whether the seeds are sprouting and continue to check for about a week. Keep the towel moist. If only half sprout your germ rate is 50%. You should tell growers if the rate is less than 75% and don't keep anything less than 50% in the seed bank.

When you have tested your seeds discard any which have molded, pests have gotten into, or is too old or failed the germination test. If you keep seeds which are older make sure you inform gardeners of this so they know the germ rate will be lower.

Cultural Techniques

Mr. Toroitich, a farmer in Kimoso, Kerio-valley Kenya uses techniques like diversity, crop rotation, and early planting/cultivation. He keeps animals on his farm to use their manure as a fertilizer. By saving his own seeds too, he plants them early and has been able to feed his family and have enough for a harvest. He uses the seeds he has left over after this to sell to other farmers in the area. Local varieties of plants too can resist drought and pests which women in Kenya have relied on during times when the weather contributed to hardships. Another reason why he grows local plant varieties is as insurance against the harsh weather and the self sufficiency from large seed companies and cartels. Mr. Toroitich uses cultural techniques in order to save seeds.

How to Prepare Gourds

Make an opening in the top of the gourd or calabash. Pour water inside and use a stick to remove the pulp. Close, cover with grasses and leave to harden for 2 weeks. Take "simotwo" bark, crush and place inside with water. This must be done several times to remove the smell and to disinfect the inside, fill with fresh cow dung and leave for days. Clean the gourd with a palm tree from the Hypaene Compressa family and then hang upside until completely dry. With some seeds use cow dung ash, need ash or wood ash to prevent pests and a maize cob to close the opening. The gourds reduce the cost for seed containers and they keep seeds cool. Another method Toroitich uses is to hang maize and sorghum seeds from the ceiling of his kitchen because the smoke keeps away most pests and also prevents mold.

Bibliography

- Kibet, Dan. Kiprop.(2012, April 20). The Seed Banks of Tomorrow: Towards Seed Sustainability and Sovereignty-Kenya. A Growing Culture. Retrieved October 7, 2013, from http://www.agrowingculture.org/2012/04/the-seed-banks-of-tomorrow-towards-seed-sustainability-and-sovereignty-kenya/.

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