

# The Incalculable Value of Seeds



Photos © Jorge Gallardo

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tell the story of the 'mobile seed library', a beautifully upcycled cabinet that shares the stories of heritage seeds

**H**ow many cultures reside in a single seed? How much wisdom does it contain? How many lives have supported the process that makes it what it is?

We set out on this participatory, educational process with the aim of supporting our hyperlocal culture by highlighting the value of the seeds of local varieties. We started by building a mobile library, which will travel through various public spaces and shops in our local towns and villages, to collect and facilitate the exchange not only of seeds, but also of the stories that accompany them.

We're hunting lost varieties of fruit, vegetables and grains that we hope are still being cultivated by a few growers who value their flavour, their healthy properties, or their resilience under difficult conditions. The rumour of their existence echoes through local stories: *aldorán* (a form of millet) grown as chickenfeed, black chickpeas cultivated for pigs, *zuya* that filled human mouths in times of hunger, when there was no wheat. Or the melons that used to be planted together with cotton, as well as purple tomatoes, heirloom oranges and rustic plums – those that grew too high up on the branches or had too many pips (from the agro-industrial point of view) – but which had exquisite flavour, or which grew in 'difficult' orchards.

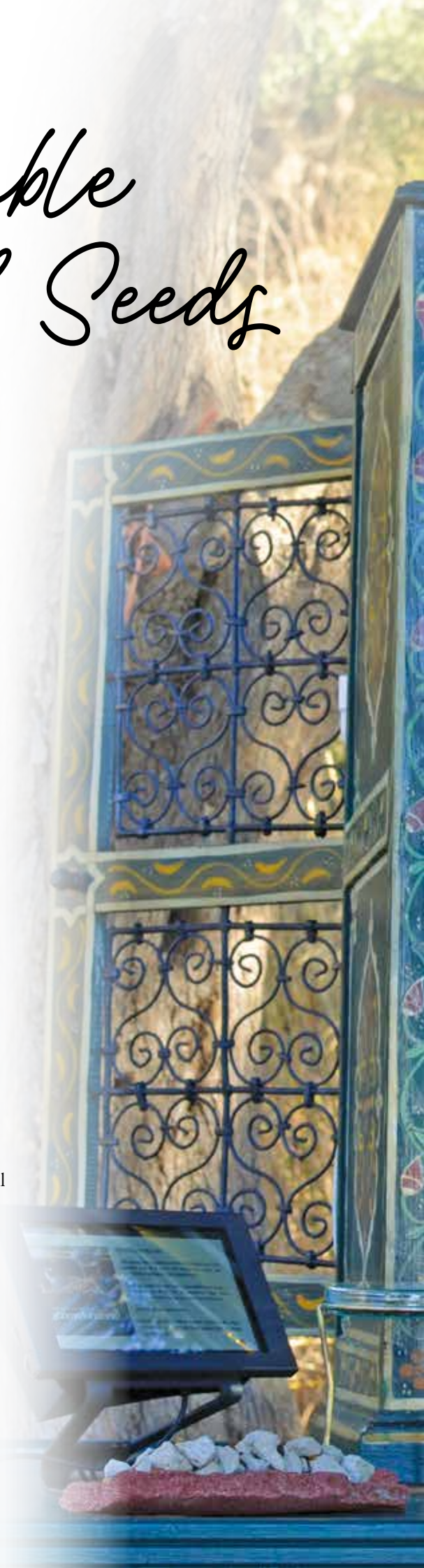
The mobile library has started its journey of visits to schools, wholefood

shops, senior centres, markets and other perhaps more unexpected places, such as the town-hall entrance or a streetcorner in front of a supermarket.

At each stop, we collect these stories (and their testimony in the form of seeds, when we find them). Our aim is that, through local participation and community involvement, the mobile seed library will serve as both a witness and a loudspeaker for the most valuable memories – acting as a bridge between generations and to support the actions dedicated to generating resilience in our community.

## Seed library or bank?

At first glance it's a mobile library – a mobile cabinet carrying seeds and stories, making pop-up appearances in our area, facilitating exchange and sharing. But it's also a bank: a place of safekeeping, where value is stored as well as shared. Each seed is both currency and archive. From the beginning, it was clear that this project wasn't just about cataloguing seeds – it was about designing encounters. In the rush to build and test it, we found ourselves creating a living prototype: a small, imperfect, rapidly evolving experiment in how art and permaculture can bring people together around what still grows, and what is worth saving and protecting.



A woman with grey hair, wearing large blue headphones and a colorful patterned top, is looking intently at a seed inside a glass dome. The dome sits on a blue-painted wooden cabinet with decorative floral patterns. The background shows a large tree trunk and green foliage. The text "Seed is the source of life. Seed is memory and the future..." is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Seed is the  
source of life.  
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## The design concept

The idea was that the library should evoke the joy and curiosity of an old cupboard with many little drawers and shelves, to enable people to interact with it in a playful way. It could store whatever seeds people wanted to share, at the same time as supporting our desire to find certain types of seeds. We assumed initially that we would keep some of each seed in the library and store the majority in a proper seed bank to protect them longer term. The library would also store lost seeds in the form of stories, and little stones or pebbles that could represent what we haven't been able to rescue, at least not yet.

We wanted a library that could be dismantled into manageable pieces, transported in a car, and set up by one person alone. We also wanted to have a built-in digital interface that could record stories about seeds, as well as offer visitors the opportunity of listening to the stories of others through headphones.

## Rapid prototype

We applied for a small grant from the provincial Environmental Department and, once approved, we had only a few months from the start of the project to the reporting deadline. To achieve the kind of agility we needed, we chose to hit the ground running and work from what we already had: talented artists and artisans residing in our community who could upcycle an old cabinet and adapt it to a new purpose. The time pressure encouraged us to work with a minimum viable seed bank, building in the flexibility to tweak it as we gained insight and feedback from its use – a form of analogue beta-testing that allows the users themselves to impact the design by how they decide to use it.

## First experiments

We chose to do a series of soft launches to meet the funding deadline, and to quickly be able to tweak and re-iterate the library:

- We invited members of our local permaculture community to interact with the library and give us feedback.
- We went into a local primary school and did an activity around seeds with 10- and 11-year-olds.
- We took the library to an artisans' market to interact with a diversity of neighbours and visitors of different backgrounds and ages.

*For millions of years, seed has evolved to give us the diversity and richness of life. Seeds are self-organised, self-evolving, self-renewing, self-multiplying living systems ...*

VANDANA SHIVA†



## Replicability and adaptability

One thing we love about the seed library is that it is a great tool for any community and can be easily created at low cost.

### Some tips:

- Upcycle an old piece of furniture, or use portable tackle boxes and crates
- Remember to get consent to use recordings, honouring privacy
- Create an easy way to share and save seeds, by providing envelopes, jars, etc.
- Keep track of provenance, dates, and growing information
- Make space to honour the lost seeds you hear about, and the memories that accompany them.



### Stacking functions: a design with many yields

We knew that as an idea, the seed library made sense, but until we had quickly prototyped it, we hadn't fully imagined the many levels of permaculture thinking it could operate on. Looking at it through a lens of some permaculture principles helps to illustrate this:

*Use and value diversity:* great diversity of seeds, localities, names, recipes and uses.

*Integrate rather than segregate:* seeds as an inroad across generations and occupations.

*Use edges and value the marginal:* no seed too small; stories matter.

*Catch and store energy:* seeds contain energy, and so do the relationships around them.

*Apply self-regulation and accept feedback:* each event informs improvements.

*Obtain a yield:* tangible (seeds) and intangible (trust, conversation, memory).

### Designing ways to interact

We quickly became aware that the success of the library would depend on designing ways to interact with local people of all ages and backgrounds. The seeds are a kind of excuse to strengthen our local networks – a seed of contact and trust for future collaborations.

The cabinet acts as a kind of interface. It lowers barriers and invites conversation. When people see it, they are drawn to explore it and find out more about it. Each drawer or compartment acts as an invitation rather than an instruction. This aligns with our approach to invite and inspire rather than to explain and instruct.

This intersection of beauty and functionality draws people in. Once people are engaged, it's not just a repository of seeds, but a social design for meeting and listening and weaving resilient community.

### Seed as metaphor and mechanism

Beyond their botanical life, these seeds carry another germinating force. Each exchange plants the possibility of relationship – of future gardens, shared meals and renewed traditions. In this sense, the seed is both a metaphor and a mechanism: a small, humble technology for collaboration. When someone opens a drawer and recognises a name, a flavour or a memory, the seed is already doing its quiet work, sprouting not only in soil but in the social ground between us.

There is an emergent quality to this project, which allows it to become what it needs to be in any given setting. With children, the digital interface can simply be removed and not used. With adults, the storytelling of seeds from their past takes on a new importance and can become central.

### Rapid learning loops

In essence, rapid prototyping is an aspect of the permaculture principle, observe and interact. This takes away the barrier of having to get something right the first time and helps us to be agile and resilient. It enables us to adjust what we do while trusting the process.

### Incalculable value

The journey of the seed library is only beginning. Each visit brings up new questions – about what we've lost, what we still hold, and how we can share it again. Perhaps this is what permaculture really teaches: that by tending the smallest things together, we start to repair the web that sustains us all.

† Bad seeds. *Index on Censorship*, 51(4), 32-33

#### More on seeds:

'Whispers from the Ancient Ones' PM123  
'A Lost Farming Culture' PM115



**Andrew, Joanna and Jorge** collaborate at the intersection of arts, culture and the climate transition, drawing on their shared roots in permaculture and community work in southern Spain. Their projects at Almenara and the land at Catalina explore how ecological restoration, creative practice and local culture can come together to regenerate both landscape and community.

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