

AMERICAN TRADITION

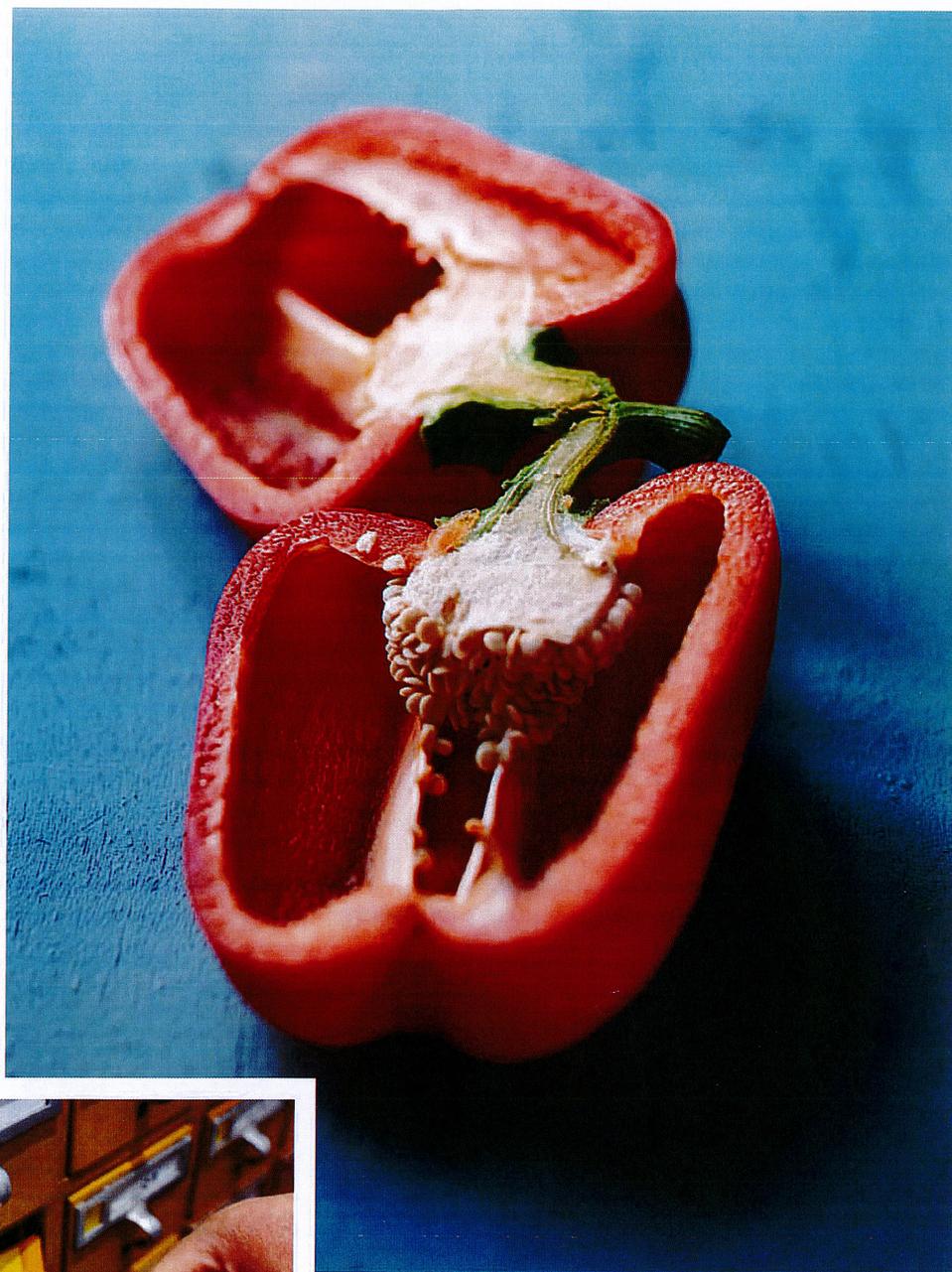
Check out these seeds!

Local libraries are getting in on the heirloom action, offering cardholders packets of seeds to grow, harvest, and (maybe) return

BY THERESE CIESINSKI

★ **LAST MARCH**, when Ben Hagyard went to the Himmel Park Library, about a mile from his home, in Tucson, Arizona, he walked past the bank of computers and stopped at an old wood card catalog near the cookbooks. Flicking through drawers organized alphabetically, he pulled out six bar-coded packets that had labels like “Devil’s Claw” and “Hopi Red” and proceeded to the checkout desk. Then he headed home, not to read but to plant what he had checked out: heirloom-variety amaranth, corn, and other seeds. He planned to grow them, harvest the seeds, and replenish the card-catalog stores so that others could repeat the cycle.

Of the roughly 17,000 public libraries across the country, about 350 are now “lending” seeds, up from just a handful 15 years ago. The aim is to make free seeds available in an effort to preserve disappearing heirloom and open-pollinated (OP) plant varieties, both edible and ornamental. An heirloom is, generally, any cultivar that existed before World War II, after which hybrids became commonplace and commercial farming began focusing on fewer varieties, ones cross-bred to tolerate shipping, drought, frost, and pesticides. OP plants, which include heirlooms that don’t self-pollinate, are generally fertilized when wind, insects, or birds carry pollen from plant to plant. Unlike hybrids, OP and heirloom seeds produce next-generation plants that are very similar to



ABOVE: Bell pepper seeds are easy to spot—and harvest. Seeds sown from open-pollinated plants deliver offspring that are very much like the parent plant. **LEFT:** Card-catalog drawers that once dispensed information about where to find books by Edgar Allan Poe and Dorothy Parker now hold labeled packets of heirloom seeds, from artichokes to zinnias.

• landscaping



packets are generally stored in a cabinet or an old card catalog, where they're divided by category—edible, herb, and ornamental—and arranged alphabetically, often with a label indicating how difficult a plant is to grow. Some of the easiest seeds to grow and save come from beans, lettuce, peas, and tomatoes; flowers that produce large seeds; and ones that are easy to identify once the flower head dries, like marigold, morning glory, and zinnia. Borrowing is straightforward: Put a few seeds of a variety in an envelope (most libraries ask that you leave enough for the next person), and jot down the name and growing information. If a garden-smart librarian isn't on hand, there are usually books, handouts, and online videos available to help. "Choosing what to grow is like going to the candy store," says Janak Desai, who uses seeds from Connecticut's Fairfield Woods Branch Library to grow the area's renowned Southport onion, which was pickled and eaten to fight scurvy during the Civil War.

Though the hope is that borrowers will be able to return seeds from a successful harvest, it isn't required. "Our aim is to put seeds in people's hands," says Alida Given, director of Alabama's Magnolia Springs Library. "You will not be fined if you don't return seeds." A 40 percent return rate is considered a huge success.

To find a seed library near you, do a Web search of your state's public libraries or consult the map at richmondgrowsseeds.org. If there isn't one near you, consider starting one; the Richmond Grows website also offers a step-by-step guide. Seed libraries don't have to be in libraries; community centers, museums, schools, or any place open to the public can work. Another option is to buy seeds from companies that specialize in heirlooms, such as Victory Seeds or Sow True Seed, and share them with other gardeners. You could also join the Seed Savers Exchange; despite the name, the organization doesn't require you to save or exchange seeds to access its thousands of heirloom varieties.

"At first, I found the idea of seeds in a library pretty funny," says Ben Hagyard, of Tucson, who's been borrowing for three years. "But I've become interested in so many things because of it. I eat better. I pay more attention to the seasons and the environment, and I've met other gardeners. How cool is that?"

the parents, a boon to gardeners who must buy hybrid seeds annually to get similar results from year to year.

Together, heirloom and OP plants represent unusual or rare varieties, some hundreds of years old and others indigenous to specific areas. Preserving plant biodiversity by saving OP seeds is important. An estimated 93 percent of the seed varieties available in the U.S. in 1903 are now extinct. Lost forever are unique flavors and plants adapted to a wide range of growing conditions, and with most of the world's food coming from a handful of plants, conserving what grows well locally is key to protecting our food supply. "There's a tremendously valuable reservoir of genetic information in heirloom and open-pollinated cultivars," says Irwin Goldman, chairman of the Department of Horticulture at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

But even more than tasty tomatoes or fragrant sweet peas, what is saved with heirloom seeds is regional and cultural history. "Seed saving and plant sharing are American traditions, practiced for hundreds of years," says Rebecca Newburn, of California's Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library. Preserving those traditions keeps the stories of these foods alive alongside the plants themselves, from the protein-rich tepary beans that were a staple for Native Americans in the Southwest to the Carolina African runner peanut, which started the South's peanut industry.

The way a seed library works is simple. Seed



ABOVE: Seed packets may be stored in paper envelopes or in zippered plastic bags, like these from Arizona's Pima County Public Library. TOP: They are usually organized in drawers by common name and include information on how difficult the seed is to grow and harvest.

PLANT SEEDS
Growing veggies from scratch is easy. Get step-by-step instructions at thisoldhouse.com/jul2015

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF PIMA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY; (OPPOSITE PAGE) (1) LAURA BERMAN/GREENUSE PHOTOGRAPHY; (2) BAKER CREEK HEIRLOOM SEEDS; (3) SEED SAVERS EXCHANGE; (4) YAKONIVA/ALAMY; (5) HOWARD RICE/GAP PHOTOS. ILLUSTRATIONS: ARTHUR MOUNT

How to save seeds

You can't return "borrowed" seeds without harvesting and drying them first. All it takes is a few simple steps

START WITH HEALTHY PLANTS

Harvest seeds from your most robust fruits, vegetables, or perennials. The steps differ only slightly, depending on whether the seeds are wet, like a tomato's, or dry, like a sunflower's.

DRY SEEDS

Let the plant flower and dry-out on the stem, then clip off the head before the seeds scatter.



Store flower heads in a warm, dry place on a tray until the seeds drop off. A paper bag with a few air holes will catch the smallest seeds when cuttings are upended.

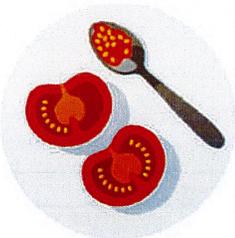


Pass heavy seeds, like allium, between two cups in front of a fan; the breeze will blow away light debris. For smaller seeds, like lettuce, use a kitchen strainer.

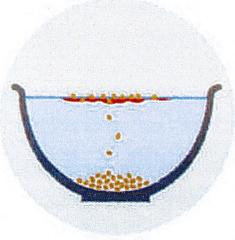


WET SEEDS

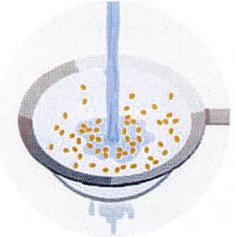
Pick the fruit or vegetable a few weeks past its typical harvest time but before it rots. Scoop out the seeds.



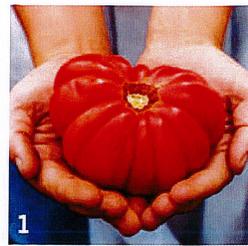
Let the seeds sit in room-temperature water for three days. This helps remove the film and gives dud seeds a chance to float to the top.



Rinse with running water in a kitchen strainer, and rub them to remove any residue.



Use a window screen to cure seeds for one week (for dry seeds) or two (for wet seeds). Put in paper envelopes or plastic containers; note the plant name and the cultivar. Keep cool and dry.



Stored heirlooms

Old-fashioned varieties can have quirky looks—and histories to match

1> TWO-HAND TOMATO

In the 1940s, M.C. Byles, a West Virginia mechanic known as Radiator Charlie, bred tomatoes that weighed 2 to 4 pounds. He then sold enough \$1 seedlings to pay off his \$6,000 mortgage. The Radiator Charlie's 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato is prized not only for its size but also for its rich, meaty flavor.

2> PINT-SIZE PEA PLANT

Most pea vines reach for the sky, but 'Tom Thumb,' introduced in 1854, is a cold-tolerant shelling pea that grows just 12 inches high and produces sweet, full-size pods. It was thought to be extinct until it was rediscovered in the garden of a Missouri woman who had been growing it since the 1920s.

3> BLOOD-RED CORN

Speckled with varying shades of red, like a slaughterhouse apron, it's easy to see how this corn got the name 'Bloody Butcher.' The earthy kernels are believed to be a mix of white and red corn varieties that Virginia colonists crossed in the early 1800s.

4> THE BEAN THAT ALMOST BITES

The popular purple-streaked 'Rattlesnake Bean' pod resembles the reptile's markings (they disappear when cooked). Eat pods young for a sweeter flavor, or let beans dry for simmering stews.

5> BLACK-HEARTED LOVE APPLE

The 'Black Krim' tomato is a dark-red-to-black beefsteak variety with a smoky, slightly salty taste. It's thought that soldiers returning from the Crimean War brought the seeds home in the 1850s. This heat-tolerant variety regained popularity in the 1990s. 🍆