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THE CONVERSATION

Julie Robinson starts seed library to facilitate home gardens

April 12
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 The Kansas City Star

Julie Robinson is the manager of the Ruiz branch of the Kansas City Public Library. Robinson is heading up a new seed library program that allows patrons to "check out" packets of flower, herb and vegetable seeds and, at the end of the growing season, "return" seeds collected from the plants they grew.

A kickoff event is 2 p.m. May 3 at the Ruiz branch, 2017 West Pennway. Star reporter Mike Hendricks and his wife, Roxie Hammill, authors of "Mike & Roxie's Vegetable Paradise," will talk about growing food in an urban setting. This conversation took place at the library.



How did you get the idea to start a seed library at a book library? Are you a gardener?

I have a brown thumb. But years ago I read an article about Oakland, Calif., having a seed garden. I thought that was really awesome in such an urban area. But they check out shovels and trowels, and we're not going down that road.



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Julie Robinson, manager of the Ruiz branch of the Kansas City Public Library, has started a program that allows patrons to "check out" seeds, plant a garden, and return seeds from the plants at the end of the season.

A little over a year ago a woman here in town, Dayna McDaniel, who founded Seed Savers KC, presented the idea to me to have one here (at the Ruiz branch). We have a community garden across the street, we have two rain gardens and a butterfly garden, so it is a good location. This year, we finally found an old CD case that we can keep the seeds in — that was one of the biggest holdups.

How will the seed library be set up?

In this sunny corner with all the windows, we will have the case of seeds and also shelves of books about gardening, about beekeeping and keeping chickens in the city, and cookbooks with recipes that use fresh garden produce.

The seeds will be organized into things you plant in cool weather and things you plant in warm weather. If you want to plant green beans, you come in and choose from all different kinds of green beans and wax beans.

We will have classes throughout the growing season on how to start seeds all the way through to how to save seeds. Beans are easy, but some seeds are tiny and need to be collected using a screen, and some wet seeds such as tomatoes need to be fermented.

Who can check out seeds?

Anyone with a Kansas City Public Library card. If you live in the metro area, you can get a card.

Where are you getting your seeds to begin with?

We are buying them from Kansas City Community Garden. They will come prepackaged with everything you need to know: when to plant them, whether to plant them in the ground or start them indoors, how deep to plant the seeds, how far apart.

How do you want people to return the seeds?

In a (plastic sandwich bag) is fine, with the full name of the plant and variety. If it's a tomato, tell me what kind — Beefsteak, for example. It's also important to keep the seeds separate. I have a nightmare that someone is going to hand me a really big, full bag of all kinds of seeds mixed together.

Are you going to have all heirloom seeds, which come back true from seed?

We will start with open-pollinated seeds, but bees and insects can cross-pollinate, so when the seeds come back I can't guarantee that they will still be heirloom. Bees cross-pollinate all the time, and they fly in a 2-mile radius.

I will take back the seeds no matter what. We just want people to grow food.

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What if somebody checks out, say, cantaloupe seeds and they fail, they don't get a single fruit, so they can't bring any seeds back?

It's OK (smiles). There is no fine.

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