



Beans and peas destined for the Carterton seed library.



Steff Willmore.



Masterton seed library.

SOW GOOD

Seed libraries are having a moment, popping up all over the place.



At the Masterton seed library, from left: Bev Jack, Jessica Davies and Georgia Davies.

MASTERTON SEED LIBRARY: LUCY COOPER

Seed libraries typically provide small quantities of free seeds. Users are encouraged to “return” seeds from their harvest or donate excess seeds from their own collection.

In the Wairarapa, new seed libraries have just opened in Masterton and Featherston. The tiny town of Eketāhuna (population 580) already has one, and the region’s newest seed library will open at the Carterton Public Library in early September.

The idea for it emerged from a recent seed saving workshop at the local community garden. The workshop was run by Good Lives Wairarapa, which manages the garden and provides work experience for people with disabilities. “We identified the need to create food resilience and empower folk to grow their own kai,” recalls Steff Willmore, workshop facilitator and organic horticulturist. “From that kōrero, the idea of a self-serve seed library based at the book library took shape.”

The newest seed library will be built by the Carterton Menz Shed, and will house a collection of locally grown organic and heritage seed. Gardeners will be invited to take a small amount of seed, grow it on, and return saved seed at the end of the season. “The aim is to create a living, evolving resource that reflects the biodiversity and growing conditions of the Wairarapa,” says Steff.

Meanwhile, 10 minutes up the road in Masterton, another community garden has launched a seed library in a slightly unusual location – a fridge. At the GROW (Gardening for Resilience and Optimal Wellbeing) garden, plots are allocated to Wairarapa’s social agencies to grow food with their clients; some plots grow food for the Wairarapa Community Centre’s emergency meals programme.

There had been a small seed box at Masterton Public Library. But when the library needed to move temporarily while its building was renovated, there wasn’t room for the seed box. It was donated to the Community Centre, which gave manager Bev Jack an idea. “We were already saving seed in the community garden to share with our gardeners,” Bev says. “And we teach students to identify the strongest plants in their garden and let them go to seed. I also knew we had a lot of experienced gardeners in the community, so I wanted to provide a place where they could share their excess seed as well.”

At about the same time, Bev was contacted by local support worker Jessica Davies, who had a large volume of excess seed that needed a home. It was Jessica who suggested

housing the seed library in a fridge, which was donated by the Wairarapa Resource Centre. Jessica, her sister Georgia, and Jessica’s wife Tanwen Gwynne-Davies teamed up to deck out the fridge with colourful artwork before it was placed near the food forest section of the garden.

There’s been a steady flow of gardeners using the seed library, with regular restocking required. “It’s an honesty system,” Bev says. “I haven’t seen a lot of people donating seed, but we hope that over time it will become more of a two-way street.”

Instructions are provided inside the fridge, with donors encouraged to name and date all seeds, and provide information on where the seeds come from. Demand has proved to be seasonal, with brassicas and onions being more popular right now than cucumbers and watermelons.

Smaller centres in the Wairarapa are also punching above their weight when it comes to seed libraries.

In Featherston, a community-led initiative, Paetūmokai Kai Tahī (PKT), is focused on seed sovereignty and sharing seed collecting skills. Its seed collective holds monthly meet-ups at PKT’s community farm, where members grow, store and share seeds together. Seeds or seedlings are available for a koha. “People bring along their excess seed, and we talk about growing seed so everyone can learn together,” explains PKT community coordinator Julia Milne.

The initiative grew from a traditional seed bank at the local community centre. However, Julia was keen to think bigger. “PKT has a kaupapa around food resilience and trying to interrupt the over-reliance on food banks in our community,” she says. “Rather than just buying seed we need to be producing our own at scale.”

In Eketāhuna, the seed library was set up by volunteers in 2023. Its central location at the public library means it is well used by both locals and those passing through. Donated seeds are packaged up by the volunteers, and those uplifting seed are asked to return seeds if possible for others to use. “It’s a real pay-it-forward service and very well used,” says Customer Engagement Representative Leah Cheetham. “With the rising cost of seeds, vegetables and flower plants, the seed library is a great way for people to save money, learn new skills, and supply their family with food without breaking the bank.” ■



MARISA KING caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is now an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.