Launching the Mass Aggie Seed Library

by Lauren Weiss

The UMass Amherst Libraries are well known for offering a variety of resources for patrons to access—and now, thanks to the work of biology major Gabriella Bosco ’20, these resources include the first-ever Mass Aggie Seed Library.

The inspiration for the project came from one of Bosco’s friends. “His community college in Florida had a tiny seed library,” she says. “The concept was so cool, and I thought, why don’t I start one here?”

At its core, a seed library is a community-focused effort to make gardening more accessible. People can “check out” donated seeds for free, just like books, plant them in their own gardens, and, hopefully, from the plants that grow, collect new seeds to bring back to the library for others to use. To Bosco, having such a setup at UMass Amherst seemed a natural extension of the campus’s expanding sustainability efforts.

Of course, Bosco realized that in order to make this happen, she would need some willing campus partners. She first reached out to members of the Garden Share Project, a sustainable gardening initiative started by UMass Amherst undergraduates in 2001, who directed her to Madeleine Charney, the research services librarian who serves as liaison to the School of Earth and Sustainability as well as Sustainable Food and Farming. Charney then connected her with Paulina Borrego, of the Science and Engineering Library (SEL), who immediately jumped on board.
“For me, I was really interested in this project because of our roots,” Borrego says, referring to the land-grant beginnings of UMass Amherst, originally known as the Massachusetts Agricultural College, or “Mass Aggie” for short. As she recently changed her liaison duties to service the agricultural sciences, Borrego was convinced that working with Bosco on the seed library was an excellent way to learn more about her new departments as well as highlight the rich agricultural history of the university and surrounding Pioneer Valley.

Together, Bosco and Borrego developed plans for a seed library to open in the Science and Engineering Library toward the end of the spring 2019 semester. Bosco spent several months contacting various agricultural companies and local stores to procure donations of more than 500 seed packets and, with Borrego, applied for a grant from the campus Sustainability, Innovation, and Engagement Fund (SIEF) to cover the costs of purchasing additional items: seed-saving tools that could also be checked out, as well as books, promotional materials, and furnishings for the designated space in SEL.

“Gabriella is a real powerhouse,” Borrego says. “I think of myself as a doer, but she really gave me a run for my money!”

With funding from the SIEF grant, Borrego put her interior design skills to work, transforming an unused area into a gardener’s oasis. Framed flower illustrations line the grass-green walls above a computer workstation, shelving for the seed-saving tools, and a repurposed atlas case containing gardening books, small flowerpots with Bosco and Borrego’s upcycled business cards, and a paper checkout binder. The Seed Library itself is housed in a refurbished wooden card catalog, with each drawer holding different varieties of edible and decorative plants, from fennel to tomatoes and everything in between.

In addition to Borrego, Bosco collaborated with Daniel Bensonoff, Sustainability Coordinator of Campus Gardens with the UMass Permaculture Initiative.

“We brought him on because we thought that the Permaculture Initiative would be really interested in such a project that would tie in with sustainability on campus,” Bosco explains. “The whole idea of not having to buy seeds every year because you save your own seed ties in with that perfectly. Dan has been helping us narrow down our goals and synergize with other parts of campus."

According to Bensonoff, the project is a perfect fit for UMass Amherst. “Historically, UMass is an agricultural institution, and I think that there’s been a huge resurgence of interest in regenerative and sustainable agriculture in the last 10 or 15 years. A lot of students come here because they are interested in learning about sustainability, land care, and food systems, so I think we need to offer them as many opportunities to do so as possible.” For his part, Bensonoff has also agreed to collect seeds from the campus’s five gardens at the end of the season to donate back to the Seed Library. Aside from preserving specific plants valuable to the gardens and promoting open-pollinated, organic, heirloom varieties, returning seed helps to replenish, sustain, and expand the collection—something that he, Borrego, and especially Bosco are very eager to see.

“I’d like to see the Seed Library grow—literally,” Bosco laughs. “I’d like to offer more varieties, and we’re hoping to host some workshops next school year on seed saving and other aspects of gardening. I’d also love to foster a community of people getting together and building their own networks—even people who have never grown anything before. I think this is a perfect opportunity for them to pick out some seeds that are easy for beginners. We’ll have some materials that they can use for planting or for seed saving, and then just maybe they’ll find a new passion.”