"The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life." - Jane Addams

The greatest service which can be rendered to any country is to add a useful plant to its culture!" - Thomas Jefferson

The Hull-House Heirloom Seed Library at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum

The Hull-House Heirloom Seed-Library, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services Sparks Ignition Grant, was created to help conserve the remaining diversity of our planet's seed stock, foster sustainable food systems and communities, and educate visitors about diverse public histories through the sharing of fascinating, hidden histories of seeds.

The seed library is a simple, and easily replicable model that seeks to address some large, complex issues that face all of us as global citizens. The seed library also represents an enhanced and expanded approach to the issue of sustainability for museums, libraries and other cultural institutions. While this project innovatively addresses topics such as resource scarcity and biodiversity that are major concerns of environmental sustainability, it also expands the conversation to include practices that promote social and cultural sustainability.

CONTEXT

Food desserts are one of the biggest public health hazards in the 21st Century. Chicago, for example, is currently home to three large food deserts, being defined as communities with little to no access to fresh produce, and overwhelmingly easy access to fast food restaurants. Many families in Chicago are extremely food-insecure and are lack ways of maintaining healthy, nourishing diets. Food deserts are typically situated in low-income areas. Mari Gallagher Research and Consulting Group, a firm with a national reputation for its groundbreaking work on food deserts reported in August 2010, that 550,382 people in Chicago are living in areas where there is a critical lack of access to fresh fruits and vegetables. This means they are more likely to have access to fast, unhealthy food. The study also shows a correlation between obesity and diabetes in these communities. Scientists predict that by in 2015, 75% of Americans will be overweight or obese. The next generation now faces the real possibility that they will live a shorter life than that of their parents.

The urban farming movement seeks to address and reverse this trend, and has had fruitful results throughout the country. Grassroots urban farmers such as Will Allen, recent MacArthur prize winner of Growing Power in Milwaukee, or Majora Carter from the South Bronx, philanthropist John Hantz in Detroit, or Mayor Gavin Newsome in San Francisco, have supported urban farming initiatives and proven that creating opportunities and access for people to farm is an important step in promoting food security and instilling healthier eating habits. The heirloom seed library, which is a way of distributing free seeds and promoting farming literacy in urban settings, is an important cornerstone of this movement.

Thomas Jefferson's quotation above reminds us of the principles of agricultural diversity that were part of the foundation of our nation's design, of which seeds are an important cornerstone. In 1878, the United States Department of Agriculture allocated a third of its budget to collect and freely distribute seeds, and by 1897 the Patent and Trade Office was supplying over 1.1 billion packets of seeds to America's farmers, a practice that continued for nearly 30 years. No one owned seeds, because they were considered part of the public trust and our collective inheritance. However, seeds are increasingly becoming considered private property, owned and sold by a small group of corporate interests. In 2012, for example, only three companies (Moncento, Dupont, Syngenta) control 56 percent of the global seed market.

The Hull-House Heirloom Seed Library seeks to address this dangerous trend. When we started this project in 2011, there were only a dozen designated seed libraries in our nation. A brief survey on the Internet shows, however, that this number has started to grow. Our project is a call to museums and libraries across the nation to join the movement, and to utilize our archiving abilities and become leaders by doing what we do best: the preserving, cataloging and interpreting of "artifacts," which in this case are heirloom seeds. Libraries have already been responsive to their communities and expanded the idea of what sorts of things they loan to the public. In many rural areas, for example, bicycles and tools have been added to the books, CD's and movies that are part of collections. Why not heirloom seeds?

HOUSE MUSUEM REDUX

Jane Addams Hull-House Museum (JAHHM) is a house museum and National Historic Landmark that is a part of the College of Architecture and the Arts at the University of Illinois Chicago. The Museum serves as a dynamic memorial to social reformer and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Jane Addams (1860-1935) and other resident social reformers whose work influenced the lives of their immigrant neighbors as well as national and international public policy. The Museum and its programs make connections between the work of Hull-House residents and important contemporary social issues.

Founded in 1889 as a social settlement, Hull-House played a key role in redefining American democracy in the modern age. Hull-House residents were bridge builders to their immigrant neighbors; they fostered communication and understanding between and among people of different class, race, language, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Addams and the residents of Hull-House created opportunities for civic discourse and dialogue, advocated for public health, fair labor practices, full citizenship rights for immigrants, public education, recreational and public space, public arts, and free speech. The Museum preserves and develops the original Hull-House site for the interpretation and continuation of the historic settlement house vision, linking research, education, and social engagement.

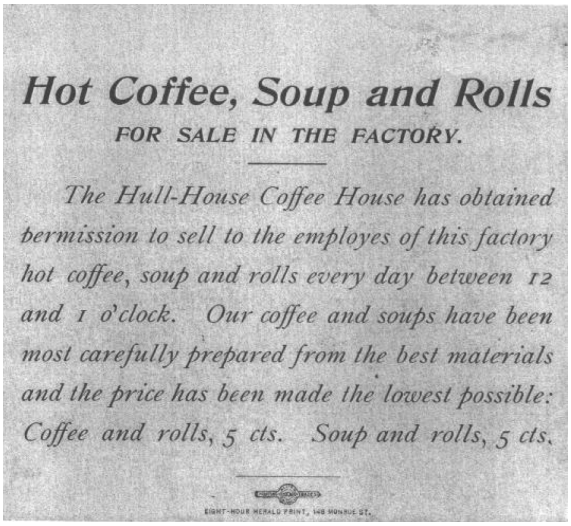
Hull-House played a major role in American history, from 1889 into the Progressive Era, proceeding through the 1930s and the New Deal, and continuing in post World War II plans for public housing and urban renewal. Situated in Chicago's Near West Side, one of the port of entry neighborhoods of this railroad metropolis, the Hull-House neighborhood in 1889 included members of nineteen different national or ethnic groups, representing Catholic, Jewish, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant religious traditions. Under Jane Addams' leadership, Hull-House attracted many talented individuals (often women) whose collective work brought Hull-House to a position of leadership in the fields of education, labor and housing reform, recreation, social work, and social research.

Peace, labor issues, immigration rights and reform, urban development and community sustainability, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, juvenile justice, public support for the arts, food justice, and free speech are among the issues we continue to address today. We do this through exhibits, interpretive techniques, and public programs. In addition, we model our work after the Hull-House Settlement's emphasis on weaving together issues, bringing issues out of silos, and building coalitions between people from diverse backgrounds and looking at complex issues from multiple perspectives. Expressing the need to be spontaneous, Addams writes in this provocative quote, "The one thing to be dreaded in the settlement is that it could lose its flexibility, its power of quick adaptation, its readiness to change its methods as its environment may demand. It must be open to conviction and must have a deep and abiding tolerance. It must be grounded in a philosophy whose foundation is on the solidarity of the human race."

At the JAHHM, we are advocates of the adage: "We cannot know where we are going, unless we know where we have been." History is an important lens that can make new solutions clear to us. We believe that the best way of preserving our national historic site is by fearlessly excavating and mining the history of the Hull-House Settlement, and discovering new ways to make our history relevant to urgent contemporary issues that are pertinent to people's lives today. The JAHHM is not alone in this belief in the potential of museums to help create a more just world. We are a member of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a group of historic sites around the globe that have committed our efforts to not only preserving the past, but to also looking forward to the future. The Gulag Museum at Perm-36 in Russia, the National Civil Rights Museum in the United States and the Work House in England are some of the cohort of institutions "dedicated to remembering past struggles for justice and connecting them with today's most pressing issues." [i]

There is a burgeoning group of historic houses and sites that have passionately embraced and joined the urban farming movement across the nation (i.e Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn; Wyck historic House, Garden and Farm in Philadelphia,; Old Stone House in Park Slope, Brooklyn). Many house museums are located on sites with access to gardens and land, which might be repurposed to benefit food insecure communities, and to develop new stakeholders in their house's history. Making our sites relevant to a more diverse public makes good preservation sense. Researching what the inhabitants of the house ate, who grew the food and who cooked it and unearthing recipes that reflect what people ate, is an underexplored and fascinating dimension to our house's histories that can be told to extremely receptive audiences.

Our commitment to food access and justice began when we opened our beautiful Residents' Dining Hall in order to host a weekly, communal food program called *Re-Thinking Soup* (funded in part by an IMLS Museums for America Grant from 2009-2012). This popular and dynamic program brings diverse members of the community together for a free bowl of soup made from local ingredients, and organic conversation about a topic related to food justice every Tuesday at noon. We link food to women's rights, labor, poverty, and other local and global issues. We feed people's minds, their bellies and their hunger for community. This project was inspired by this artifact we found in our collection.



Hot Coffee, Soup and Rolls

FOR SALE IN THE FACTORY.

The Hull-House Coffee House has obtained permission to sell to the employes of this factory hot coffee, soup and rolls every day between 12 and 1 o'clock. Our coffee and soups have been most carefully prepared from the best materials and the price has been made the lowest possible: Coffee and rolls, 5 cts. Soup and rolls, 5 cts.

JAHHM, Memorial Collection, UIC Special Collections

Our public programming has always provided a new lens to magnify and see our history and view our artifacts. Starting the seed library, we discovered that in 1891, the Hull-House Settlement became a branch reading room and delivery station for the Chicago Public Library, supplying magazines and papers in over a dozen different languages and several hundred books to the predominantly immigrant, working class communities living in the near West-Side. Jane Addams also started "The People's Friendly Club" that helped communities cultivate vacant lots in Chicago in order to grow healthy food. The urban agricultural movement in Chicago had roots in urban reform movements in the Progressive Era.

Fenced-in garden at the Flower Technical School, Chicago, 1915.
CHM, DN-0064572; Chicago History Museum.

Addams also worked for the Department of Agriculture during World War I to promote farming practices, and during both the First and Second World Wars, Hull-House reformers participated in the founding of the Women's Land Army of Illinois, which was a civilian group that trained women in agricultural to replace men called up to the military. This cultural history grounds the contemporary movement for food and justice in a way that speaks to several different audiences.

SEED LIBRARY DESIGN

ABOUT: WHAT IS A SEED LIBRARY?

A seed library is a depository and circulating collection of seeds held in trust for the members of that library. We solicit members from the public at large, who apply for a library card, and then learn the history of the seeds, and borrow seeds for their garden, or for planting in a container garden or windowsill planters. Members grow the plants, and at the end of the season, they let a few plants 'go to seed.' From those plants, they collect seeds and return the seeds to the library.

The Hull-House Heirloom Seed library is located in an easily accessible space in the Museum's gift store in the Residents' Dining Hall, so anyone can access the library during regular museum hours, and museum educators encourage visitors to become members after tours as well.

BUILDING A SEED COLLECTION

Although the precise definition of "heirloom" is passionately debated, it is similar to the idea of family heirlooms that have been cared for, and handed down from one family member to another for many generations.

Before the industrialization of agriculture and the widespread use of large farm technology and tools like tractors, combines and fertilizer spreaders that helped to distribute and spray pesticides and chemicals, a much wider variety of plant foods were grown for human

consumption. In modern agriculture however, most crops are grown in mono-cultural plots and selected for their productivity, their ability to withstand mechanical picking and cross-country shipping, and their tolerance to drought, frost, or pesticides.

Heirloom gardening, which favors diversity, regional plants that thrive in different planting conditions, and local and seasonal eating that doesn't require long distance shipping, is a reaction against this trend. Seed saving is the most secure way to preserve the diversity of our seed stock. Some heirloom seeds are extremely old and even date to pre-historic times, and there are some who argue that in order for a seed to be considered an heirloom, it must be 100 years old. Others prefer the date of 1945 that marks the end of World War II, and the beginning of widespread change in our attitudes toward growing and food production. However, many gardeners consider 1951 to be the latest year a plant can have originated and still be called an heirloom, since that year marked the widespread introduction of the first varieties of seeds that were engineered by agricultural companies that lead to a period in the 1970's where modified seeds proliferate exponentially in the commercial seed trade.

The Museum's heirloom seed library consists of healthy vegetables, herbs, and unique flower seeds that thrive in the Chicago region. We asked local farmers to donate seeds, which they readily did, and asked local food activists such as Michael Thompson from the Chicago Honey-Co-op that had been sponsoring a yearly seed swap in Chicago already, as well as other individuals to help. We also joined the Seed Savers Exchange, a wonderful, well organized non-profit organization dedicated to saving and sharing heirloom seeds. (It is not necessary to become a member to order seeds online at www.seedsavers.org).

We worked with Christian Alfaro and Franziska Andonopolis, two vivacious, urban farming enthusiasts, who are undergraduate student interns from the University of Illinois at Chicago. They contacted visionary leaders in the seed saving movement, and asked for input and suggestions and best practices with leaders in the field such as Peter Hatch and Pat Brodowski, Director of Gardens and Grounds and head gardener at *Monticello;* farmers working with Will Allen of Growing Power; and leaders at Seed Savers Exchange, built into our project design. In addition, they looked nationally at the Bay Area Seed Interchange Library Project (http://www.ecologycenter.org/basil/), and the Hudson Valley Seed Library (www.seedlibrary.org), and internationally to the Heritage Seed Library in the United Kingdom (www.gardenorganic.org.uk/hsl/) that practices conserving vegetable varieties that are not widely available, and the University of Copenhagen (botanik.snm.ku.dk/english/), where there is a seed library but by appointment only, in order to glean ideas and models that that efficiently addresses the needs of the Chicago community.

Our seed library is housed in a re-purposed wooden library card catalog holder that had been decommissioned from a library and easily found on etsy.com. This provides the perfect conditions for storing seeds, which need to be shielded from light and moisture. The seeds are classified alphabetically by common name, with a system that marks the level of skill needed to cultivate the plant. The card also relates the seed's particular history and story, as well as critical information about how to grow the seed, as well as providing some recommendations for cooking the vegetable or fruit.

Golden Midget Watermelon *Citrullus lanatus*
Watermelons first grew in the middle of the Kalahari Desert. They were a source of water for thirsty traders, who began to sell the seeds in cities along the ancient Mediterranean trade routes.

This beautiful miniature watermelon has salmon-pink flesh and golden-yellow color when fully ripe. It originates from a cross breeding in 1959 by Elwyn Meader and Albert Yeager at the University of New Hampshire. They crossed "Pumpkin Ring" with "New Hampshire Midget" to create this cute and delicious watermelon species. At 3 pounds, it is easy to grow, especially in cramped places.

Watermelon seeds were transported by Africans to North America aboard the first slave ships on their way to Massachusetts in the early 17th century. Since this time, the watermelon has a close association with black culture in the southern states because this was a crop that white slave owners allowed enslaved Africans to arow.

Cherokee Trail Bean *Phaseolus vulgaris*

The Cherokee Trail Bean carries with it a powerful story of resistance. This seed comes from the collection of Dr. John Wyche from Hugo, Oklahoma. His Cherokee ancestors carried this bean over the Trail of Tears, the campaign enacted by the United States government to relocate 15,000 American Indians.

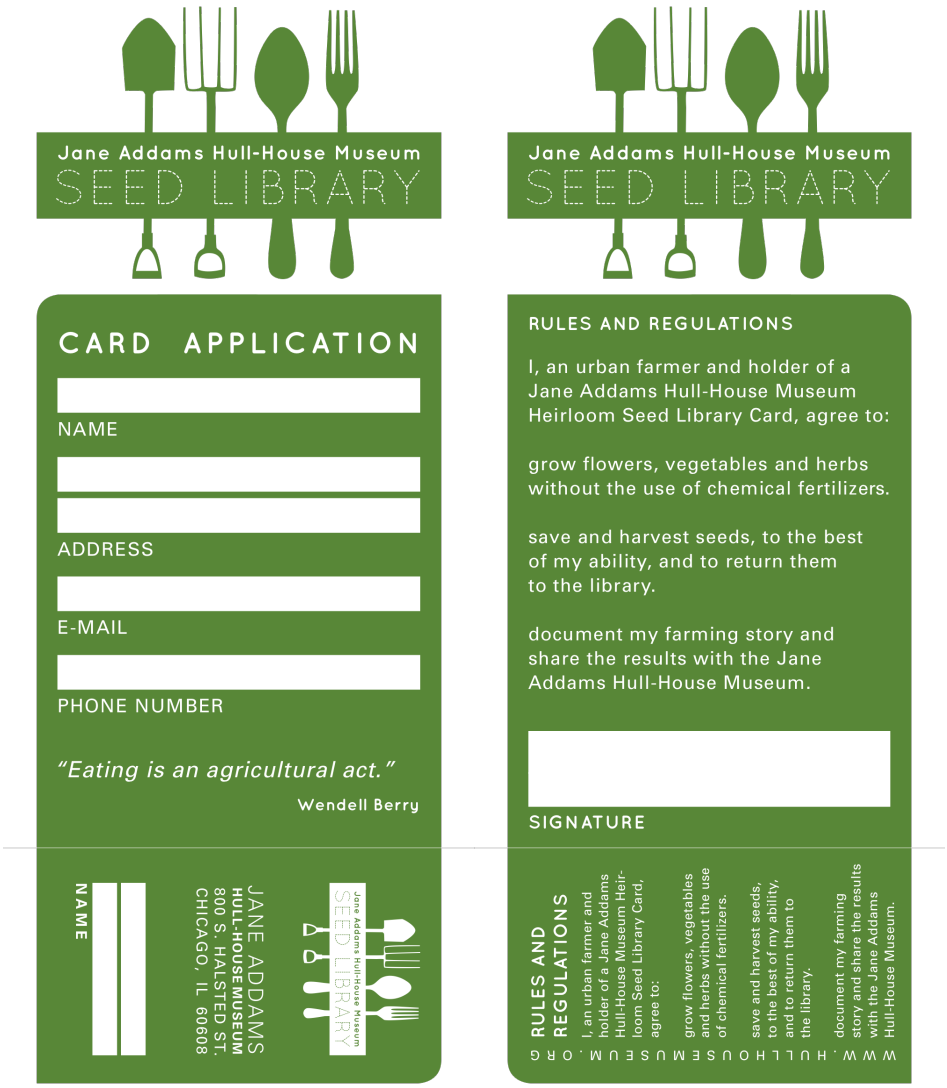
This program resulted in the death of 4,000 indigenous peoples, who were rationed only a handful of boiled corn, one turnip, and two cups of heated water per day. From the Smoky Mountains in Georgia to Oklahoma (1838-1939), indigenous peoples carried this seed throughout their journey in hopes of planting a new life.

For the contemporary gardener or farmer, these seeds are known for excellent germination rates and add a wonderful dash of color to vegetable gardens. They make great bean soups, chilies and can be used for Latino cuisine.

This aspect of the project draws upon the work of scholars like Elaine Heumann Gurian, among others, who have argued that Museums as storehouses of memories are responsible for presenting and organizing meaning in new sensory forms.

2. **START: LIBRARY CARDS.**

The public is invited to apply for a library card at our museum, in order to "check out" seeds with the agreement that they grow them out and "return" some seeds of the next generation at the end of the season. Like any public program, great attention needs to be paid to publicizing the existence of the seed library using a variety of communication devices. Social networking and emails and other digital forms worked well, but we were also conscientious of the so-called digital divide that still exists that prevents some of the most needy patrons who may not have access to email. For that reason, we made sure to also secure press and radio and old-fashioned flyers and made sure we notified local community leaders to activate networks via word of mouth.



3.) ACTION: PLANT, GROW AND SAVE SEEDS

Planting, growing, harvesting food and saving seeds are ancient forms of knowledge that has often not been passed down through generations, particularly in urban settings. Seed-saving workshops and fun and informative educational resources need to be made available to card-holders so they can become seed and planting literate, and to encourage the expansion of our palates and healthful eating.

Several simple manuals exist online and in book form, and You tube videos are also prolific that educate and teach the public how to seed save.[ii]

People can gather their seeds by themselves, or with the help of one of our museum educators on staff. A hard-copy manual about how to seed save is available to takeaway, as well as made available on the web for download, or if people prefer, suggestions for pod casts by farmers online that teach beginners how to seed save.

At the beginning of the planting season, we hosted a seed swap that was attended by 100's of local urban agricultural enthusiasts, partnering with over a dozen local groups.

Seed Swap and Story Exchange, Photo: Lisa Yun Lee

The Associated Press, and Chicago Tribune and the BBC covered the event. Community members donated thousands of heirloom seeds to our library collection, swapped seeds with one another- and shared their stores about the seeds- their grandmother who had planted a breed of heirloom squash, their favorite recipe for bread or a pie that was made from some vegetable- or a rare, delicious tomato variety that was brought to the US by an Italian immigrant in the early 20th century.

We not only increased our collection of seeds, but used this as an opportunity to bring together a disparate but burgeoning group across the city of Chicago who are seeding a revolution by growing food and nourishing themselves and their communities.

EXPANDING OUR PARTNERS AND OUR REACH

Although one of the goals of the seed library was also aimed at bringing new visitors to our Museum and site, we also acknowledged that in order to have a greater impact, we might partner with other organizations to bring this project to neighborhoods to make it even more accessible.

Fresh Moves is an adaptive reuse project launched by Steven Casey, Jeff Pinzino and Sheelah Muhammad that is a mobile grocery store in a decommissioned Chicago Transit Authority bus that brings fresh groceries directly to the communities that needed them most. Architecture for Humanity helped transform the bus with volunteer designers and builders lending their ingenuity to figure out how to keep vegetables from rolling around as the bus travels to routes in Lawndale and Austin, neighborhoods in Chicago, making three stops a day, three days a week. In its first five days, project manager Dara Cooper related that the bus served over 600 customers.

Photo: Lisa Yun Lee

Working with Cooper, the Hull-House easily duplicated our seed library to place on the bus so that the seeds might travel to neighborhoods and be more accessible.

Photo: Lisa Yun Lee

To date, there have been 90 people who have filled out library cards and checked out seeds.

EVALUATION

As with any ambitious project directed towards positive social change, it is both imperative and exceedingly complicated to evaluate and measure impact. Our focus is on changes in behaviors, relationships, actions, and/or activities of the people and organizations with whom we directly work. Since impact is often the product of a confluence of events for which no single agency or group of agencies can realistically claim full credit, we also look at the logical links between interventions and outcomes that our project offers, rather than trying to attribute results to any particular intervention. We are not naïve about the impact

that our efforts can have on issues like food insecurity, obesity and the dwindling bio-cultural diversity that threatens our planet's well being, acknowledging that there needs to also be federal agricultural policy changes, urban renewal architects and continued educational and medical reforms and outreach in order to address the problems in a holistic and comprehensive manner. Yet we do believe that our project is a simple and ingenious way for us as a museum, with our history to become leaders within this movement and not to simply be bystanders in a movement that is sweeping our nation.

This project is evaluated from various angles. After seed-saving workshops and the seed-swap, we handed out qualitative surveys that asked visitors to answer questions that addressed both quantitative and qualitative and affective issues: This included regular demographic inquiries such as age and zip code, but also questions such as: Have you ever planted a seed before? How does this project make you feel? Why are you interested in becoming an urban farmer? What do you think about our Heirloom Seed Library?

In addition, for our evaluation, we have crafted impact statements for which we are in the process of verifying and gathering additional data. Impact statements are crafted by project staff from quantitative data and also anecdotal evidence and then verified by external evaluators who know about the project, but are not directly related.

One impact that we hope to have is simply inspiring visitors to become members to join the library.

IMPACT STATEMENT: Since 2010 and the launch of the Hull-House Heirloom Seed Library, over 280 people have taken the initiative to fill out library cards and check out seeds, read seed histories and join the movement for urban agriculture.

Another impact we are in the process of evaluating includes how efficacious we are in teaching and circulating how to seed save.

IMPACT STATEMENT: Since 2010, over 150 people have attended seed saving workshops and have there have been over 100 seed saving manuals circulated to museum visitors.

IMPACT STATEMENT: Since 2010, over 75 different people have returned seeds to the Hull-House Heirloom Urban Library indicating they have learned the art of seed-saving and participated in an important aspect of urban farming and the care of our environment.

Another impact that we hope to have is to not only be a replicable project, but to inspire other museums and libraries to start libraries and to develop their own unique and innovative was of becoming part of the urban farming movement.

IMPACT STATEMENT:

Since 2010, the Hull-House Museum staff has been asked to present our Heirloom Seed Library project at 3 national and 2 international conferences, sharing what we have learned about process with over 400 museum professionals. In addition, we know of at least two additional libraries that we have contributed seeds to and helped to start their own libraries.

At the JAHHM, we believe just as Jane Addams did at the turn of the century, people have a stake in each other's health. This link is what binds us together as families, communities and a nation. In addition, we believe that by thinking expansively about our expertise and talents, museums can become the engines for innovative, creative solutions to concerns of our visitors and our communities.

---

[i] Online. Available HTTP: <http://sitesofconscience.org/en/> (accessed May 10, 2010).

[ii] A reliable classic includes, *Seed to Seed: Seed Saving and Growing Techniques for Vegetable Gardeners*, Suzanne Ashworth and Kent Whealy, Seed Savers Exchange, 2nd edition, 2002. For additional resources, please go to our website http://www.hullhousemuseum.org.