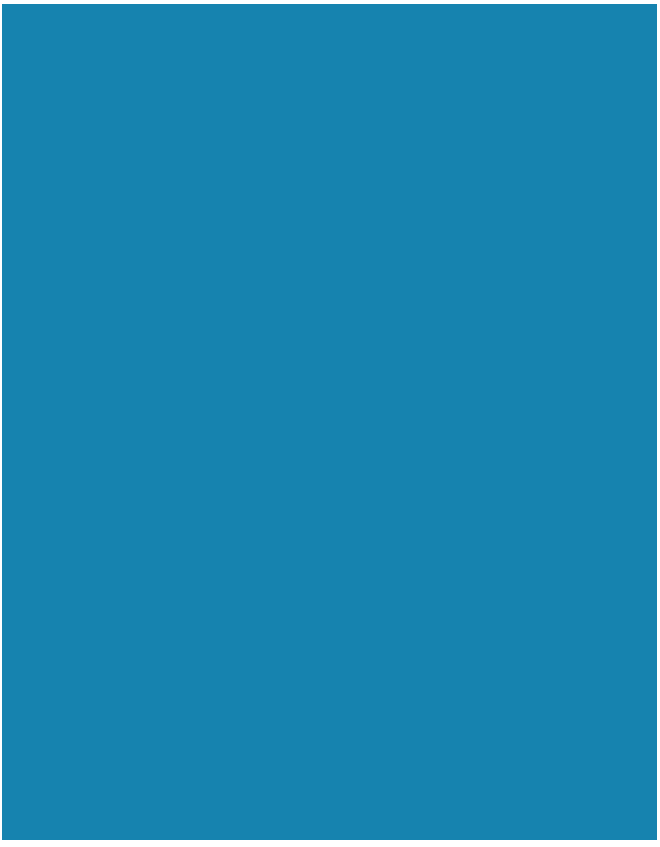
SEEDS OF



DIASPORA

ARCHI TANGLE



SEEDS OF



DIASPORA

Edited by Lynnette Widder and Wendy S. Walters

ARCHITANGLE

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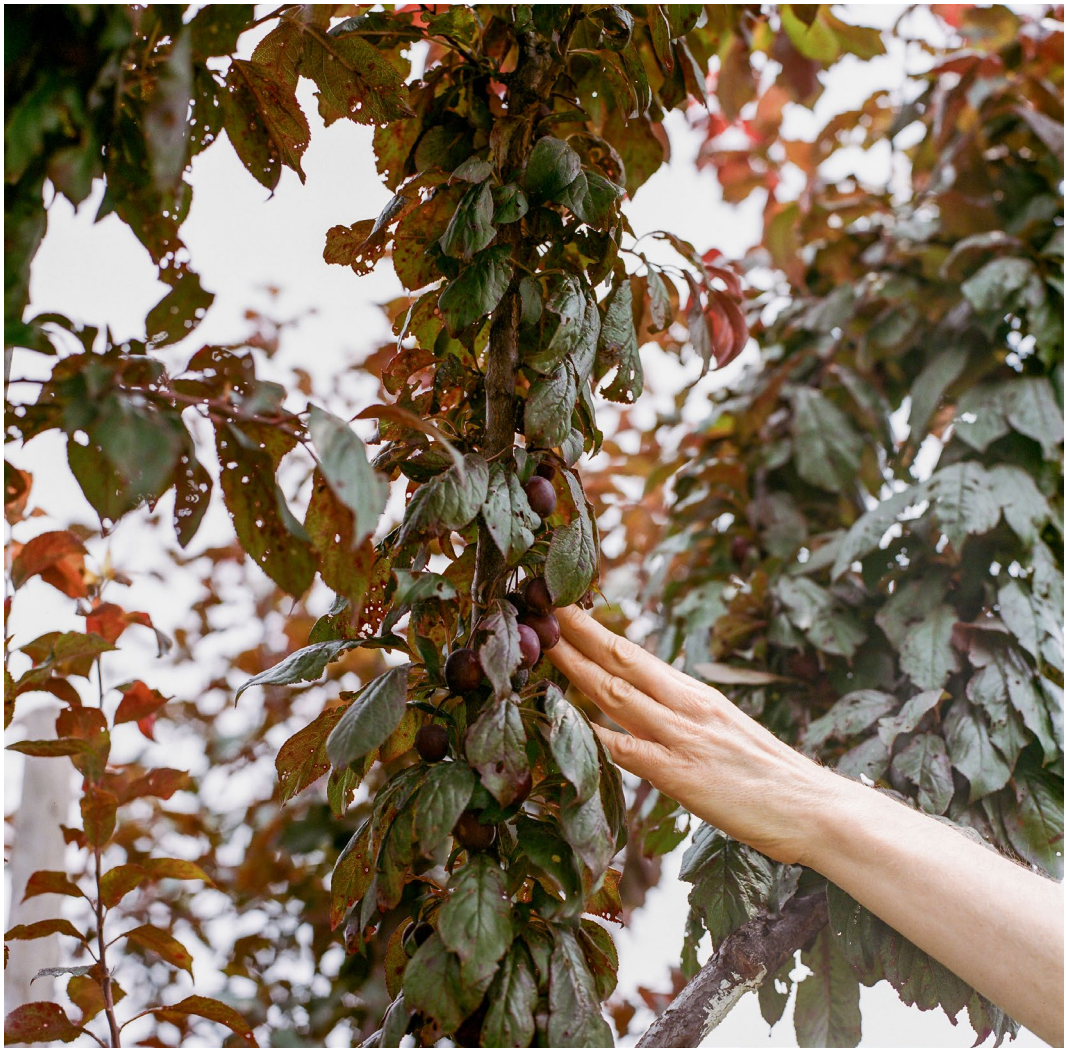
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An Introduction: Archives and Portals

Wendy S. Walters,
Lynnette Widder,
and Fern Thompsett



[Figure 1] Heritage Cherry, The Open Orchard, project by Sam Van Aken, Summer 2025. Photograph by Thad Russell.

This is a collection of works about plants and people in motion. It brings together writers, artists, and scholars across diverse disciplines to offer insights about the ethical dilemmas that arise in practices of cultivation, broadly defined. It considers the many ways that plants and people activate social and botanical systems. One objective is to inspire readers to think about how seeds and plants shape aspects of the broader human experience.

Another objective is to offer a new approach to thinking about time. Seeds archive the past and serve as portals for future actions. They cull the evidence of our shared failures. They activate our collective potential through cycles of renewal. Seeds show up in our healing practices. They index our stories of connection, loss, and shifting identities. They reveal histories of human migration, especially the kind that results from environmental instability. They comprise essential elements of our cuisines. They establish our cultural traditions. After war, restoration ecologies of seeds and plants reflect the evolving terms of peace.

The title of this collection, *Seeds of Diaspora*, refers to two aspects of origin. The word "seeds" connotes the part of the plant that is used for sowing. In a metaphorical context, the seed represents a core idea, the artifact of evidence, or information stored across time and distance as a symbol of perseverance. The word "diaspora" invokes themes of home, belonging, displacement, and how these are asserted. It describes the conditions of being on land and moving across it. It draws us to contemplate histories of residency, inheritance, and loss. Themes of dispersal—removal and tenancy—appear in many of the essays.

By invoking one or both terms, the writers introduce questions about plant subjectivity and life force. They also invite thinking about how to recognize, define, or imagine plants as an active, communicative presence. Their essays note how acts of dispersal support the journey toward any number of imagined homelands. People recognize plants as members of their communities, even as they acknowledge the hierarchies that define these relationships. References to seeds and plants offer contour and depth.

Many of the book's contributors are engaged in first steps toward understanding dilemmas that have more recently come to the surface.

The essays in this volume offer distinctive approaches to scholarship, community building, and shifting paradigms of the lifeworlds shared by plants and humans. Curiosity about ethics in relation to practices of cultivation serves as a unifying principle.

Though each of these essays is informed by careful research, many are written in the first person. Why? It is worth noting the current moment. In the midst of profound structural and systemic changes, a recalibration of authority is warranted. There are moments when a writer's influence may reside more deeply in their own convictions than in the institutions or historic systems to which they traditionally would be beholden. While some writers might offer a point of view that stands alongside established research and creative practice, other writers may engage existing arguments and analysis with a new reality in mind.

It should come as no surprise that the approaches to the subject of seeds in this collection are likewise varied. Dorothy M. Peteet catalogues and documents seeds gathered in Alaska, Siberia, and the eastern United States, as well as a collection originally curated over years by Uhl Kuhn, a former civil servant at the Port Authority of New Jersey. Thad Russell depicts both collections in photos. Lucas Mertehikian considers Jorge Luis Borges's affection for the eucalyptus tree as it was expressed through his poems and lectures. Lynnette Widder looks at the German postwar city inflected by microclimates, unexpected color, and landscape imaginaries. Naeem Mohaiemen visualizes the scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose's insistence that plants are sensate. Anelise Chen imagines the lived experience of plants and other forms of non-human immigrant life. Owen Taylor tells the story of Truelove Seeds, a community farm–based company offering culturally important vegetable, herb, and flower seeds. Darby Minow Smith studies the grasses of Montana to understand the possible missteps of her forefathers. Fern Thompsett investigates a small intentional community in the Columbia River Gorge, and the challenges that come with withdrawing from commercial agricultural practices. Wendy S. Walters considers the legacy of tenants alongside cultivated plants in New York City's Central Park. And Sam Van Aken tells the history behind his Open Orchard, a collection of hybrid trees containing antique and heirloom fruit varieties that are native to, originated in, or were grown in and around New York City over the past 400 years.

Though there are varying means of asserting scholarship across the book, the essays have one essential thing in common: each one seeks a new critical framework that melds botanical and social contexts. Each one insists that there is no path for social understanding that can be separated from the physical world. There is an urgency underlying this attention. Refugees from climate change migrate at rates comparable to those displaced by the globally dispersed wars of the twenty-first century. We hope these pieces inspire other works that acknowledge seeds as a source and conduit for new perspectives, especially in a time of profound and lasting social transformation.

There is another way the book invites the reader's engagement. Marginalia in the form of grafting illustrations, by artist Sam Van Aken, are positioned across its pages. These drawings, which were commissioned especially for this project, are offered as an invitation to the act of annotation. We hope they remind the reader that their own ideas, images, or graphic responses are also essential contributions to the larger story of plant–human relations. There is space in the margin for the reader's remarks, too, as we acknowledge the shifting fields on which our arguments are sown. This is done in the spirit of collaboration, a practice which emulates the mutuality that is essential to plant ecosystems.

In many respects, the projects explored here are linked through their investigative instincts and imaginative gestures. We anticipate other discoveries as these modes of inquiry become more refined. In this moment, we offer this book to those who are encouraged by the possibilities inherent in plant–human interactions, which predict and index the societal transformations of every era. We hope that they join us in these attempts to map our shared potential—what we know of it now—and what it might become in the world of the future.



Treasure Reserves for Ecological and Climate History: The Importance of Seed Collections

Dorothy M. Peteet

Dorothy M. Peteet is a paleoecologist at Columbia University's NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies and Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory. She takes sediment cores to discover and analyze fossil seeds found in bogs, fens, marshes, and lakes, along with pollen, in order to understand how vegetation has changed through time, especially since the last glaciation.

Thad Russell

Thad Russell is a fine art photographer based in Providence, Rhode Island. His work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Observer*, *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, and *The New York Times*, and it has been exhibited in galleries and museums across the United States. He teaches photography at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).



[Figure 1] **Seed collection in a wooden cabinet constructed by Uhl Kuhn, housing 4,000 species of plants. Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, Columbia University, August 2025. All photographs by Thad Russell.**



[Figure 2] Each species is catalogued and numbered by genus and family and represents a unique shape and size.


Filiaceae to Filiaceae
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