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Ten Unexpected Things to Check Out at Public Libraries

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The first thing that usually comes to mind when people think of public libraries is books. But at many libraries across the country, you can check out so much more than the latest self-help guide, best-selling thriller, or romance novel.

While books still top the list of borrowed items, most libraries have expanded their offerings to include everything from musical instruments, baking pans, and science kits to sewing machines and board games. These nontraditional materials make up what librarians and others call the “Library of Things.”

“The initial concept of a Library of Things came about decades ago. This is an opportunity for libraries to start curating a local collection of items, outside of book materials, based on the local needs of the community,” says Cindy Hohl, president of the American Library Association. “It’s really to

help expand or redefine the concept of a library collection.”

The Marion Public Library in Iowa, for instance, has a longarm quilting machine. At the Brooklyn Public Library, you can check out vinyl records.

“There are so many fun things,” says Hohl. “It helps reduce consumption and waste while enabling residents to borrow items that maybe they don’t want to purchase or can’t afford to.”

Here are other hidden gems you can check out with a library card.

A Tool Library

All over the US, there are lending libraries where patrons can borrow all kinds of tools. One of the oldest is in California. The Berkeley Tool Lending Library was established in 1979 and has been a model for similar libraries ever since. It has over 5,000 tools, including for plumbing and carpentry, power tools, and much more. The library also offers workshops on things such as gardening, home maintenance, and DIY projects.

“It’s the best of both worlds,” says Hohl. “It’s helping provide library users with access to information and the tools to actually get the project done.”

Seed Libraries

The first seed library in a public library opened 20 years ago in New York State. Since then, hundreds more have sprouted up. While each works slightly differently, most allow patrons to take seed packets, be it for vegetables, flowers, or herbs. Sometimes patrons are encouraged to contribute seeds in reciprocity too, if possible. For those without a place to plant seeds, a few libraries also have gardens on their grounds for community members, such as The Plot at the Salt Lake City Public Library in Utah.

Memory Kits

From Baltimore County Public Library in Maryland to the Daniel Boone Regional Library in Missouri, memory kits are also common. Made for caregivers and family members, the kits can help people with dementia or other cognitive impairments to reminisce and chat about their past with loved ones. Memory kits, which are often thematic, usually include hands-on activities like scrapbooks, games, and puzzles.

They can be useful in “supporting caregivers and helping everyone live their best lives while going through that process of helping a loved one, a family member, a relative, a neighbor, as they transition through a different part of their life,” says Hohl.

Cosplay Repair Station

Attending Comic-Con and have a cosplay costume malfunction? The San Diego Public Library (SDPL) has a Cosplay Repair Station, coinciding with the annual event, that can help. The station provides tools and supplies, such as sewing machines, hot glue guns, and soldering irons, for quick costume or headpiece repairs. Leading up to the popular event, it also hosts costume-related workshops.

“There are a lot of ‘horn emergencies’ for some reason; horns, shoes, and wigs are the big ones,” says Catherine Hoang, a SDPL librarian. “We use a lot of Velcro and duct tape and sewing.”

Adventure and Hiking Kits

To encourage people to explore the outdoors, be it a national park or a neighborhood one, many libraries have kits and passes. At the Stillwater Public Library in Minnesota, for example, you can check out Nature Backpacks, with items like binoculars, a compass, and nature guides, as well as Birding Backpacks. The Kingston Library in New York State has adventure backpacks for birding and nature walks, and to help identify rocks, minerals, and trees. Through the Los Angeles Public Library’s Expedition LA program, library card holders can visit over 200 state parks for free and also take out hiking backpacks.

Borrow the Internet

While most libraries have public computers, some also lend out Wi-Fi hotspots to make it easier for patrons to connect at home or on the road. For instance, you can borrow Wi-Fi hotspots—portable devices that allow smartphones, laptops, and other such devices to access the internet wire-

lessly—from libraries in Chicago, Kansas City, and Seattle for three-week periods.

“Changing with the times and helping to provide access through all different formats is something that libraries really strive to do,” says Hohl.

Spice Library

Some libraries are adding a culinary twist to their collections with spice libraries and clubs, which provide patrons with herbs, spices, and sometimes accompanying recipes. The Springvale Public Library in Maine, for instance, has a spice library with over 40 samples. The spice library at a **Pueblo City-County Library District (PCCLD)** branch in Colorado has more than 10 options.

“It’s a way to remove barriers for people to expand, say, their cooking experiences, learn new recipes, and use spices they might not normally use,” says PCCLD’s Aaron Ramirez.

American Indian Flags

In Minnesota, the Hennepin County Franklin Library has a lending library of American Indian flags, which represent different tribes, tribal governments, and Indigenous communities. The flags can be checked out by staff and community partners for occasions such as official public programming and ceremonies, tribal events, and graduations, or to represent a tribal member.

“Every state in this nation has Indigenous

people,” says Hohl. “Everyone wants to see themselves in their community, and to see yourself in your own library, that’s something that is very meaningful.”

Take a Bike Ride

If in need of a bike, you can check one out from at least 20 public libraries, usually for the day. Some libraries also give riders helmets and locks. One of the first such US programs was set up in 2013 by the Athens County Public Libraries in Ohio, which has bikes, bike locks, electric bikes, and more for patrons. The Madison Public Library in Wisconsin has partnered with the city’s bikeshare program so patrons can check out a pass for up to a week, providing access to over 350 electric-assist bikes around the city.

Free Tickets to Local Attractions

If you want to check out your city or town’s attractions, check out your local library first. From libraries in the Bay Area and Denver to the Nashville Public Library, many offer free passes to museums, aquariums, zoos, and other cool cultural and educational spots. In New York City, library card holders can reserve a Culture Pass for free admission to such places as major museums, historical societies, and botanical gardens.

“The mission of any library has always been about access to information, literacy, learning, and culture,” says Hohl. “We believe that libraries are the heart of a community, so we want to make sure that we have resources for everyone to improve the quality of their life.”