

Collecting and Storing Seeds from Your Garden

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One of the first requirements for growing a successful garden is finding good seed from plant varieties that have been adapted to your area. Many companies provide such seed. When you calculate the value of the food you grow, you will find that high quality seed is a bargain.

At some time, though, you may want to collect, store, and plant seed from your own garden rather than buy the seed. This fact sheet describes how.

Collecting Seeds

Don't save seeds from vegetables or flowers labeled "hybrid." Seeds from hybrid varieties produce a mixture of plant types, most of which are inferior to the parent. Many varieties could be hybrids but may not be designated as such. The following sections describe how to save seeds for a variety of different plants.

Seeds easily saved

Tomato

1. Save seed from the fully-ripe fruit of the desired tomato plant.
2. Squeeze the seeds onto a paper towel or a piece of screen.
3. Leave the seed at room temperature until it is thoroughly dry.

Pepper

Select mature pepper, preferably one turning red, and allow it to turn completely red before extracting the seed. Place seeds on a towel or a piece of screen until they are thoroughly dry.

Eggplant, host tomato

(ground cherry), garden huckleberry
Separate seeds from the mature fruit and dry thoroughly at room temperature.

Beans, peas, soybeans, and other legumes

1. Leave pods on the plant until they are "rattle dry."
2. Watch the pods carefully because some varieties split and scatter the seeds when they are dry.
3. Pick dried pods and place them in a well-ventilated area at room temperature. When the pods are completely dry, remove the seeds.
4. To control possible weevil infestation, place seeds in a freezer for 24 to 30 hours.

Lettuce

Lettuce seeds are more difficult to collect, but you can save them.

1. Leave a plant or two to produce a seed stalk.
2. After the plant blooms and the flower forms a miniature "dandelion head," gather the seeds.
3. Separate the seeds from the chaff by rubbing them with your fingers.

Seeds difficult to save

vine crops: cucumber, melons, squash, and pumpkins

It doesn't usually pay to save these seeds. Without controlled pollination, these crops cross with other varieties and sometimes other types. Muskmelons do not cross with cucumber, however.

You can control pollination in your garden, but it requires careful attention. First, you need to distinguish the difference between male and female flowers. Male blossoms are on a longer stalk and do not have a miniature fruit at the base as do female blossoms.

1. With careful observation, note the blossoms that open the following day. They have a bright yellow color and a distinct pointed tip.
2. In the evening, select male and female flowers on the same plant. With a paper clip for small flowers or a rubber band for larger flowers, prevent the flower from opening. Flowers only open early in the day.
3. In the morning, pluck the male blossom and touch the cluster of pollen (called anthers) to the center of the female flower (called the stigma).
4. Close the female flower again so bees can't get in.
5. Tag the blossom.
6. Grow the fruit to maturity for the desired seed.

The fruit must be very ripe for seeds to germinate correctly. Cucumbers must be entirely yellow, and squash and pumpkin must be thoroughly mature. Separate the seeds from the fruit flesh and dry them at room temperature.

Biennials: carrot, beet, onion, and cabbage family

Biennials are questionable for seed collection. It takes a lot of work to carry over the plant root from the first season to the second year when seed stalks form. Many members of the cabbage family intercross and can also cross with native wild crucifers such as mustard, cress, radish, or turnip.

- Carrots cross with the prevalent wild carrot. Select desirable beet or carrot

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roots and keep them cool and moist, perhaps buried outdoors in sand. In early spring, plant the roots in an uncrowded area of the garden because they grow very large.

- Keep onion bulbs cool and dry during the winter, then plant them in early spring.
- After spring growth, seed heads form. When heads are quite dry, gather the mature, plump seed before it falls to the ground and complete the drying at room temperature.

Flower seeds

You can save many flower seeds, though crossing some varieties can cause deterioration from the original over time.

- Gather mature seed pods (stock and poppies) or seed clusters (zinnia, strawflower).
- Leave sunflower heads on the plant as long as birds don't bother them.

- When the top of the blossom separates from the seed, or birds start eating the seeds, cut the head and finish curing the seed in a warm, ventilated area. You can also eat seeds or use them as bird feed after the seeds dry.

Storing Seeds

Keep seeds in a labeled container or envelope in a cool, dry place where they are protected from insects. Storage life of seeds varies widely. Here is a guide:

- *Short-lived seeds* (1-2 years): corn, onion, parsnip
- *Intermediate seeds* (3-4 years): bean, carrot, leek, pea
- *Long-lived seeds* (4-5 years): beet, chard, cabbage family (broccoli, brussels sprouts, cauliflower), turnip, radish, cucumber, eggplant, lettuce, muskmelon, pepper, pumpkin-squash group, tomato, watermelon.

An ideal way to prepare seed for long-term storage is to place seed packets in a

jar, seal the jar tightly and place it in a refrigerator or freezer. To help absorb moisture, place a small, cloth bag filled with dry, powdered milk beneath the seed packets in the bottom of the jar. Use about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of dry milk from a recently-opened package.

Test Germination

To test seeds for germination before planting:

1. Moisten two or three layers of paper towels.
2. Place 25 to 50 seeds on the towels and roll the towels loosely. Place them in a plastic bag.
3. Keep the towels in a warm place such as on a kitchen counter or on top of a water heater.
4. Some seed such as radish germinates in 2 or 3 days. Peppers can take 10 to 14 days. Observe the seed at 2-day intervals to determine the degree of germination.

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