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Collecting and Storing Seeds from Your Garden

One of the first requirements for a successful garden is good seed of varieties of vegetables adapted for your area. Various seed companies can provide this seed. When you calculate the value of the food you grow, you will find that reliable seed is a bargain.

You may want, at some time, to collect and store seed from your garden for future use. This fact sheet tells you how.

Collecting Seeds

Do not save seeds of any vegetable or flowers labeled "hybrid." Seeds from hybrid varieties will produce a mixture of plant types, most of which will be inferior to the parent.

Seeds easily saved

✓ **Tomato.** Do not save seeds from hybrid varieties (many tomatoes are hybrids). From a fully ripe tomato of the desired plant, squeeze the seeds onto a paper towel or a piece of screen. Leave at room temperature until thoroughly dry.

✓ **Pepper.** Select a mature pepper, preferably one that is turning red, and allow it to turn red before extracting the seed. Place seeds on towel or screen until thoroughly dry.

✓ **Eggplant, husk tomato (groundcherry), garden huckleberry.** Separate seeds from mature fruit and dry thoroughly at room temperature.

✓ **Beans, peas, soybeans, and other legumes.** Leave pods on plant until they are rattle dry. Watch carefully because pods of some varieties will split when they are dry and scatter the seeds. Pick dried pods and place them in a well-ventilated area at room temperature. When pods are completely dry, remove the seeds. To prevent weevil infestation, place seeds in freezer for 24 to 30 hours.

✓ **Lettuce.** Lettuce seeds are more difficult to collect, but they can be saved. Leave a plant or two to produce a seedstalk. After the plant blooms and the flower forms a miniature "dandelion head," gather the seeds. Separate the seeds from the chaff by rubbing with fingers.

Seeds difficult to save

✓ **Vine crops: cucumber, melons, squash, and pumpkins.** Usually it does not pay to save these seeds. Without controlled pollination, these crops become crossed with other varieties and sometimes other types. Muskmelons will not cross with cucumber, however.

Controlled pollination can be accomplished in the garden, but it requires very careful attention. 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 female blossoms do. With careful observation, note the blossoms that will open the following day. They will have a light yellow color and a distinct pointed tip.

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, which occurs at an early hour. In the morning, pluck the male blossom and touch the cluster of pollen (anthers) to the center of the female flower (stigma). Close the female flower again so bees cannot get in. Tag the blossom. Then grow this fruit to maturity for the desired seed.

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

✓ **Biennials: carrot, beet, onion, and cabbage family.** Very questionable for seed collection because of the work involved in carrying over the plant root from the first season into the second year when seedstalks are formed. Many of the cabbage family intercross and may also cross with native wild crucifers such as mustard, cress, radish, stock, or turnip. Carrots will cross with the prevalent wild carrot.

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

Keep onion bulbs cool and dry during the winter, then plant in early spring.



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After summer growth, seed heads will form. When heads become quite dry, gather the seed before it falls to the ground and complete the drying at room temperature.

Flower seeds

Many flower seeds may be saved satisfactorily. Over a period of time, crossing of some kinds may cause deterioration from the original. Gather mature seed pods (stock, poppies) or seed clusters (zinnia, strawflower).

Permit sunflower heads to stay on the plant as long as birds do not bother them. When the top of the blossom has separated from the seed or birds are eating the seeds, cut the head and complete curing in a warm, ventilated area. Seeds can be eaten or used as bird feed any time they are dry.

Storing Seeds

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

- *Short-lived seeds (1-2 years):* corn, onion, parsnip.

- *Intermediate (3-4 years):* bean, carrot, leek, pea.

- *Long-lived seeds (4-5 years):* beet, chard, cabbage family (broccoli, brussels sprouts, cauli-

flower), 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 mason jar, seal the jar tightly, and place in a refrigerator or freezer. To help absorb moisture, place a small cloth bag filled with dry powdered milk in the bottom of the jar beneath the seed packets. Use about ½ cup of dry milk from a recently opened package.

Test Germination

To test seeds for germination before planting season:

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

Prepared by Duane Hatch, Extension Agent, Lane County, Oregon State University.