



Saving Seed

From the Garden

Many gardeners are interested in saving seed from their flowers and vegetables. Seed saving can be a rewarding and cost saving way to garden... but beware of the pitfalls.

Don't save hybrid seed.

Not every plant's seeds are worth keeping. Hybrid plants are developed by crossing specific parent plants. Hybrids are wonderful plants but the seed is often sterile or does not reproduce true to the parent plant. Therefore, never save the seed from hybrids. Most (but not all) bean, beet, carrot, chard, lettuce, onion, pea, pumpkin, radish, spinach, and squash are non-hybrids. Many (but not all) corn, cantaloupe, cucumber, pepper, tomato, and watermelon are hybrids. Always check the seed packet. Hybrids will always say "hybrid".



Isolate plants.

Another major problem is most plants' flowers are open pollinated by insects, wind or people. These plants include squash, cucumbers, melon, parsley, cabbage, chard, broccoli, mustard greens, celery, spinach, cauliflower, kale, radish, beets, onion, and basil. These plants cross with others within their family. The only way to maintain the original variety is to isolate by large distances. Isolation is often impossible or impractical in a home garden.

What can you save?

Standard or heirloom varieties that are not cross-pollinated by nearby plants are good candidates. Many gardeners successfully keep beans, peas, tomatoes, lettuce, and peppers. Plants you know are heirloom varieties are easy to save. Ask the person or organization you obtained the seed from how they did it. Some people like to experiment, but make sure you don't bet the whole garden on saved seed.

When saving seed, always harvest from the best plants. Choose disease-free plants with qualities you desire. Look for the most flavorful vegetables or beautiful flowers. Consider size, harvest time and other characteristics.

Always harvest mature seed.

You must allow the fruit and seed to fully mature. For example, cucumber seeds at the eating stage are not ripe and will not germinate if saved. Because seed set reduces the vigor of the plant and discourages further fruit production, wait until near the end of the season to save fruit for seed.



Seeds are mature or ripe when flowers are faded and dry or have puffy tops. Plants with pods, like beans, are ready when the pods are brown and dry. When seeds are ripe they usually turn from white to cream colored or light brown to dark brown. Collect the seed or fruits when most of the seed is ripe. Do not wait for everything to mature because you may lose most of the seed to birds or animals.

Dry Method

Beans, peas, onions, carrots, corn, most flowers and herb seeds are prepared by a dry method. Allow the seed to mature and dry as long as possible on the plant. Complete the drying process by spreading on a screen in a single layer in a well-ventilated dry location. As the seed dries the chaff or pods can be removed or blown gently away. An alternative method for extremely small or lightweight seed is putting the dry seed heads into paper bags that will catch the seed as it falls out.

Wet Method

Seed contained in fleshy fruits should be cleaned using the wet method. Tomatoes, melons, squash, cucumber and roses are prepared this way. Scoop the seed masses out of the fruit or lightly crush fruits. Put the seed mass and a small amount of warm water in a bucket or jar. Let the mix ferment for two to four days. Stir daily. The fermentation process kills viruses and separates the good seed from the bad seed and fruit pulp. After two to four days, the good viable seeds will sink to the bottom of the container while the pulp and bad seed float. Pour off the pulp, water, bad seed and mold. Spread the good seed on a screen or paper towel to dry.

Seed Storage

Successful long-term storage of seeds is very dependent upon maintaining proper moisture and temperature conditions. It is especially important that seeds be adequately dry before storage. During storage the seeds should be kept as cool as possible. Temperatures between 33 and 41 degrees are optimal. An unheated basement room or crawl space is a good choice if it is not too damp.

Seeds must be stored dry. Place in paper or plastic envelopes or bags. Mason jars can also be used. Make sure you label all the containers or packages with the seed type or variety, and date. Put in the freezer for two days to kill pests. Then store in a cool dry place. Seed that molds was not sufficiently dry before storage.



For dry regions, like eastern Idaho, humidity is generally low and not a problem. However, if you want to be sure your seeds are dry before storing you can subject them to gentle heat from a light bulb or pilot light. In order to avoid seed damage from too rapid drying be sure that the temperature does not exceed 95 degrees F. One method of stabilizing the moisture content of seeds in storage is to enclose a desiccant with the seeds. Placing few tablespoons of powdered milk wrapped in a tissue and packaging with the seeds does very well. Note that seeds in the Legume family (peas, beans, etc.) do not require a desiccant. Over-drying of legumes will result in an excessively hard outer shell which inhibits germination.

Seed viability decreases over time. Parsley, parsnip, leek, and onion must be used the next year. Most other seeds will easily keep for 2 to 5 years if stored in cool, dry conditions.

Seed saving is essential for maintaining unusual or heritage vegetables and flowers. It is a great way to propagate many native plants too. There are numerous seed saver exchanges, clubs, and listings in magazines like *Organic Gardening*.

Adapted from article by Barbara Larson, Unit Educator, University of Illinois Extension
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