

As if you did not have enough to do in the garden at this time of the year, I thought that I might spark your interest in a hobby that has been in existence for thousands of years and has recently made quite a comeback. Saving seeds from plants that you have grown can be quite rewarding, very educational, and most of all, fun!

There are a multitude of reasons why home gardeners are interested in saving seeds. One of the most common reasons is that many gardeners, worldwide, are striving to be self-sufficient. A huge undertaking in the process of self-sufficiency is to grow your own food. By collecting seed to replant the following season, you are taking it one step further.

On that same note, it is very rewarding to be involved in the entire ''circle of life'' in your garden. The glory of harvesting a bounty of food from a few packets of seeds is truly indescribable. Imagine how much more fulfilling it is to collect the seed and make the circle complete!

A major concern in the seed world today deals with multinational corporations buying out family-owned seed companies. Along with these takeovers, comes the loss of several unique open-pollinated varieties that are replaced with standard, easy-to-produce hybrids. According to Suzanne Ashworth, author of Seed to Seed, from 1984-1987 the closure of 54 mail-order seed companies resulted in over 940 open-pollinated plant varieties to become unavailable. In order to preserve the diversity in seed varieties, it is essential that both family-owned seed companies and the home gardener continue to produce and save these seeds. The result: a wealth of good-tasting, nutritious food that we can enjoy and pass down to future generations.

This ''passing down'' notion can be applied from season to season, too. For example, many people will save the seed of a particular

variety that is well suited for their climate type or because a variety is resistant to certain diseases. By saving the seed, the desirable traits can be utilized season after season.

And let us not forget the joy of sharing these wonderful varieties with our fellow gardeners. Chances are, if you are enthused about a specific variety that you grow, other people will be enthused, as well. What a great way to promote the diversity of garden plants! So how do you find fellow seed savers? Seed Savers Exchange, an organization that has been around since 1975, does a tremendous amount of work in linking seed savers and seed companies to rare, unique, and heirloom varieties of seeds. I have belonged to them and well worth it.

You can contact Seed Savers Exchange at:
3076 North Wimm Rd.
Decorah, Iowa 52101
Ph. (319) 382-5990
Fax (319) 382-5872

How To Save Seeds?

The answer to this question is actually quite complex. There are numerous ways to save seed and oftentimes the methods are dependent on the type of seed that you wish to save.

Hybrid vs. Open-Pollinated vs. Heirloom

Some of the most common misconceptions that our customer service representatives deal with are the definitions of 'hybrid', 'open-pollinated', and 'heirloom'. These are terms that are related to seed saving so we thought that now is a good time to set things straight.

Hybrid-By definition, a hybrid is the offspring of two parents that differ in one or more heritable characteristics. There seems to be a lot of negative connotations to hybrids but in actuality, hybrids

can often times benefit the gardener. For example, say that there is a tomato that tastes great but is very susceptible to a certain disease. By hybridizing the good tasting tomato with a highly disease resistant tomato, it is possible to have the best of both worlds. Often times, hybrids are also more vigorous than their open-pollinated counterparts. The problem that occurs when seed saving is that seeds collected from a hybrid variety will revert back to one of the parents or in a few cases may be sterile. Using the tomato example, if you collected the seeds from the ''good tasting/disease resistant'' hybrid, those seeds would either not germinate or they would grow to be either the ''good tasting'' parent variety or the ''disease resistant'' parent variety. A final note on hybrids...the terms ''hybrid'' and ''genetically engineered'' are not necessarily synonymous. Often times, hybrids occur from an insect cross-pollinating two different varieties or from a horticulturist hand-pollinating two different varieties. The way new species develop is through natural hybridization.

Open-Pollinated-As opposed to a hybrid, an open-pollinated seed is produced by crossing two parents from the same variety, which in turn produces offspring just like the parents. Seeds collected from an open-pollinated variety will grow true to the plant that the seeds were collected from. With this in mind, it is important to choose open-pollinated varieties when saving seed.

Heirloom-An heirloom variety is open-pollinated and has been passed down from generation to generation. There is no standard length of time that the variety needs to be ''in existence'' to be called an heirloom but usually 40 years is sufficient.

***A note on ''organic''-Any of the above mentioned seed types (hybrid, open-pollinated and heirloom) can be organic but do not have to be. The term organic strictly refers to the growing practices that occur in the production of the plant.

Resources to Get You Started

Seed to Seed by Suzanne Ashworth. The complete seed saving guide for 160 vegetable crops, with detailed information about each vegetable. Botanical classification, flower structure, pollination method, isolation distances, caging, and hand pollination techniques are all part of this informative book. Plus, you'll learn about harvesting, drying, cleaning and storing seeds. Paperback, 224 pages.

How to Save Your Own Vegetable Seeds from Seeds of Diversity-Canada. Learn how to preserve your favorite family heirlooms as well as your modern day favorites. This book will teach you how to save your own vegetable seed, which can help you become more independent. Paperback, 33 pages.

The New Seed Starters Handbook by Nancy Bubel. We haven't seen a more thorough and practical book on this topic. Complete with over 100 pages that give instruction on starting 200 of the most common plants from seed. There is also an entire section devoted to saving seeds. A very complete work that would be a welcome addition to many gardeners' libraries. Paperback, 385 pages.

Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades by Steve Solomon. Bushels of information are included in this classic. This book offers a comprehensive course in preparing and maintaining a vegetable garden on any scale. An extensive section listing dozens of vegetables tells how and where to grow and harvest varieties best suited to the maritime climate, as well as how to save seed from these vegetables.

The easiest vegetables to learn to save seed from is:

Bean - Bean flowers are self-pollinating and almost never cross-pollinate. As a precaution never plant two white seeded varieties side-by-side if you intend to save seed because crossing may occur

but not be visible. It is always best to save seed from plants that ripen first and are free from disease. Harvest seed pods when completely dry, crush in a cloth or burlap sack and winnow the seeds from the chaff. Seed Life usually 3 years.

Corn - All corn varieties are wind-pollinated and will cross-pollinate with each other. Varieties should be hand-pollinated or isolated by 1 mile to ensure purity. To avoid inbreeding, save seed from at least 25 different plants. Allow ears to dry on plants, harvest and shell. Seed life usually 1 year.

Leek - Biennial. Leeks will not cross-pollinate. Select only the best bulbs to keep for seed. Bulbs will store very well at 32 degrees F. In milder areas they can be mulched heavily and overwintered in the garden. Plant out leek bulbs in early spring and allow them to form seedheads. As soon as the seedheads start to dry, they should be cut off. Place seedheads in a dry shaded area and allow to dry completely. Seeds can be easily removed by rubbing seedheads between hands. Seed life usually 1 year.

Lettuce - There is only a slight chance of cross-pollination between lettuces. As a precaution separate by 25' from other varieties that are going to seed. Allow plants to bolt and form seed stalks. Bag bolting stalks to avoid bird damage and to keep any rain off the seeds. Seeds are produced over a 2-3 week period and will require repeated picking. Seed lasts approximentaly 5 years.

Pepper - Peppers will cross-pollinate, so separate by at least 500' or plant in insect-proof cages covered with screen. Select peppers that are ripe, fully colored and show no signs of disease. Scrape seeds off the core and onto a paper plate to dry. Make sure to label each plate. Seeds are viable for 3-5 years.

Tomato - Cross-pollination between modern tomato varieties seldom

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occurs, except in potato leaf varieties ("Stupice" is one) which should be separated by the length of the garden. Do not save seeds from double fruits or from the first fruits of large fruited varieties. Pick at least one fruit from each of several plants. Squeeze seeds and juice into a strainer and wash, spread on a paper plate and dry. Usual seed life.. 3 years.

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Info taken from my brain, SSE, Territorial seeds