

Year Round Gardening

Saving Seeds

Debra Stinton Othitis, Colorado Master Gardener

When one can go to any garden center and be overwhelmed with a plethora of seed choices, why would anyone want to bother with saving seeds from their garden? Here are some reasons why seed saving has become an important part of the gardening process for many people. First, saving seeds can save you money. It also preserves your favorite open pollinated varieties of plants, the ones you know will thrive in your particular garden. And finally, saving seeds is a fun and educational way to teach children about where their food comes from, and how it is reproduced.

Here are few terms to understand if you want to save seeds:

Open Pollinated - These plants result from the combination of parent plants that are genetically similar and share specific traits that distinguish them. They either self-pollinate or are pollinated by insects or wind. Thus, they breed true to form and saved seeds will produce plants very similar to the parent plants.

Hybridization - Hybrid varieties result from the intentional crossing of two genetically distinct parents. Hybridized seeds are deliberately created to breed desired traits such as flavor or size or disease resistance. First generation hybridized plants express the desired traits. However, their offspring do not breed true to form. Seeds must be purchased each year for hybrid plant varieties in order to see the same desirable traits. In general, hybrid plants have more disease resistance, and often higher yields than non-hybrids.

Heirloom - This is any plant variety with a history of being passed down within a family or a community, and pre-date 1951 the year when the first hybrid vegetables were developed. Heirlooms MUST be open-pollinated, but not all open-pollinated plants are heirlooms. In general, heirloom varieties are known for their flavor, fragrance and color.

Self-Pollination - These are plants that do not rely on pollinators or wind to transfer the pollen from plant to plant. Self-pollinated plants include tomatoes, peppers, beans, peas and lettuce and they produce some of the easiest seeds to save.

Now let's consider which seeds to save. Collecting seeds from annual plants is the easiest. Plants such as tomatoes, beans, peas and lettuce complete their entire life cycle in one growing season and are self-pollinating. Annual vine crops such as cucumbers, squash, melons and pumpkins are more difficult to save due to cross-pollination. Your best results will come from seeds selected from self-pollinated, disease-free, healthy plants



Photos courtesy of Freddie Bogardus

that produced the biggest, tastiest, most interesting or most colorful fruit or flowers this year. Select seeds from the mature, but not over-ripe fruit. Some of the easiest seeds to save and reuse are annual flowers, such as marigolds, nasturtiums, zinnias, calendula, and snapdragons. Just take the spent flower and pull out the seeds.



Allow bean pods to turn brown before harvesting seeds.

Seeds can be stored for at least one year in a cool, rodent-free place without significant loss of germination. It is possible to achieve up to a 10-year storage life by drying the seeds at 100 degrees for six hours to a desired 8% moisture content.

Saving your own seeds is a pleasurable and rewarding activity. It offers a sense of self-sufficiency and can save money. You might also consider participation in a seed-saver's exchange where your extra seeds may be traded for unusual types that are not available through other sources.

Learn more about this subject from CSU Fact Sheet No. 7.602 - *Saving Seed* available online at <http://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/saving-seed-7-602/>

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research-based answers. Get answers to your horticulture questions by visiting ask.extension.org any time day or night. Follow the El Paso County Master Gardeners on www.facebook.com/ColoradoMasterGardeners.EPC/

How to Save Seeds

Tomatoes – Select the fruit after it ripens, but before it rots. Cut the fruit and squeeze out the pulp into a container. Add a little water, and then let this ferment 2-4 days at room temperature, stirring occasionally. When the seeds settle out, pour off the pulp and spread seeds thinly to dry thoroughly.

Peppers – Seeds mature after the peppers have changed color. Cut open the pepper and scrape out the seeds. Dry the seeds in a non-humid, shaded place until they break rather than bend.

Beans, Peas – Leave pods crops on the vine until the pod dries. Harvest the seeds before they are dispersed.

Squash, cucumbers, pumpkins – Leave these on the vine until after the first frost, and then separate the seeds from the pulp and let them dry at room temperature.

Flowers (such as marigolds, nasturtiums, zinnias, calendula, and snapdragons) - Collect flower seeds when flowers fade, dry, and have dry puffy tops or dry seed pods that begin to break open.