

HARVESTING VEGETABLE AND GARDEN SEEDS

Seed saving can be a rewarding and cost saving way to garden, especially if you have a flower or vegetable plant that you would like to grow next season. Seed saving involves selecting suitable plants from which to save seed, harvesting the seeds at the right time, and storing them properly.

Not every plant has seeds worth keeping. The seeds from hybrid plants are often either sterile or will produce offspring different from the parent plant, and would not be good candidates for seed saving. Similarly, plants that are cross pollinated can produce seeds that result in different looking offspring. Isolating the plants to prevent cross pollination is impractical. Some of these plants include squash, cucumbers, melons, parsley, basil, beets, and onions.

Avoid collecting seed from a diseased plant. Plants grown from their seed may also be infected. Plants that are good candidates for seed collection are often standard or heirloom varieties such as beans, tomatoes, lettuce, and peppers. Save seeds from the most vigorous plant with the best tasting fruit or most beautiful flowers. Do not save seeds from weak or diseased plants. Since deadheading before seed set encourages more blooming or fruiting, wait until the end of the season to allow the seed to mature for harvest. Seeds are ripe when the flowers have faded and have dry or puffy tops. If pods are produced, wait until the pods are dry and brown.

Beans, peas, and most flower and herb seeds can be allowed to mature and dry as long as possible on the plant. Continue the drying process by spreading them on a screen in a single layer in a well ventilated location. Seeds can be separated from the rest of the seed heads by lightly blowing away the chaff.

Saving seeds from fleshy fruits such as tomatoes, melons, squash, and roses involve scooping the seed masses out of the fruit, or lightly crushing the fruit. The seed mass is then placed in a jar or bucket with a small amount of water. Let the mix ferment for 2-4 days, swirling the jar twice a day. By the fifth day, the seeds should sink to the bottom. At that point, pour off the liquid, rinse the seeds, and spread them out to dry on paper towels.

Label the dried seeds with their name, variety, and date of collection and store them in

a tightly sealed jar or individual envelopes in a sealed container. Keep the seeds in a cool dry place, such as a refrigerator. A small amount of desiccant can be added to keep the seeds dry. Silica gel, which is sold in bulk at craft stores, is a commonly used desiccant. One to two tablespoons of powdered milk wrapped in a tissue or cheesecloth can also be used.

Since seed viability can decrease over time, plan on using your seeds within three years.

The **Master Gardener Hotline** is open from April to October, Monday through Friday. Lines are available 9:00 am to noon and 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm at 888-678-3464

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