

Seed Saving

Many gardeners purchase plant seeds for their vegetable and flower gardens each and every year. The cost of these purchases can quickly add up, especially if you are buying organic or heirloom seeds. A great alternative to buying seeds each year is to harvest and save your own. The plants you grow this year will produce seeds that, if correctly processed and stored, can be used in future years to plant your garden. Seed saving is fun and easy, it can save you money, and you can use your extra seeds as gifts or to swap with others.

There are two different ways of harvesting and preparing seeds: wet processing and dry processing. To properly save your seeds, you must choose the method that is correct for your plant.

Wet Processing

Seeds that are found in damp, juicy flesh require wet processing. Plants that require wet processing include tomato, pumpkin, melon, and cucumber. To save them, follow these steps:

1. Remove the seeds from the flesh of the plant. This can be done by squeezing gently, picking by hand, or using a tweezers.
2. Place the seeds in a bowl of water. Stir them repeatedly. The good seeds will sink to the bottom, while the excess plant material and any bad seeds will float.
3. Carefully pour off the dirty water and debris. Repeat the stirring and draining process until the seeds are completely free of pulp.
4. Put the seeds in a strainer and rinse them in water.
5. Place the seeds on a screen, cookie pan, or piece of hard plastic. Do not place them on cloth or paper.
6. Spread the seeds in one thin layer to ensure they dry quickly.
7. Seeds will dry most quickly in a dry, warm area with light air flow. Temperatures over 95 degrees can damage the seeds, so do not place them in direct sunlight or in the oven to dry. On humid days, pointing a gentle fan at the seeds can hasten the drying process.

Once your seeds have been fully processed, they are ready to be stored. Seeds last longest when kept in cool, dry places. Store your seeds in airtight containers; glass and metal are much more effective than plastic. Small bags or envelopes are not effective at keeping out heat or moisture, but they can be used for easy sorting and then stored inside a larger airtight container. The longer seeds are stored the less likely they are to germinate when planted, but seeds that are stored properly can last several years. If you require longer storage, consider keeping your seeds in a freezer, provided they have been properly dried.

References

- A Seed Saving Guide for Gardeners and Farmers*, Organic Seed Alliance, 2010
Saving Seed from Your Garden, Marty Bergland, doitgreen.org/green-living/saving-seed-your-garden
Seed to Seed, Suzanne Ashworth, Seed Saver Publications, 1991
Vegetable Seed Saving Handbook, howtosaveseeds.com



Dry Processing

Seeds that dry on the plant, often inside husks or pods, require dry processing. These include corn, beans, onions, carrots, and most flowers. To save these types of seeds, follow these steps:

1. Whenever possible, allow the seeds to dry on the plant while it is still in the ground. Sometimes inclement weather will require that the plants be pulled and hung to dry indoors.
2. Remove the main seed structure, such as the stalk, flower head, or pod, from the plant. This can be done by hand, with scissors, or with gardening shears.
3. Thresh the seeds, meaning separate the seeds from the rest of the plant material. This can be done by shaking, beating, or rubbing vigorously.
4. Remove the actual seeds from any remaining hulls, chaff, dirt, or debris by winnowing. With small quantities, this can be done by hand. For larger amounts, it is faster to gently toss the seeds into the air or to blow on them with a gentle fan. The heavy seeds will easily be separated from the lighter bits of debris.

Choosing Seeds

Whether you are starting a vegetable plot, creating a pollinator garden, or just adding a few potted herbs to your windowsill, one of the very first things you'll need to do is get seeds. Initially, this might seem like an easy task. After all, there are so many places to get seeds these days; you'll even find them at your local supermarket or big box retailer. But not all seeds are created equal! Before making a speedy purchase, you need to think about the effect your choice will have on you, your family, and local wildlife. Here are some key issues to keep in mind when choosing seeds:

Organic- look for the USDA Organic seal to guarantee that seeds have been grown organically. Organic seeds are produced using very specific guidelines, which prohibit synthetic fertilizers, most pesticides, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Some non-organic seeds are grown in ways that damage the environment, and some of these seeds contain chemicals that stay in the plant as it grows and develops, meaning it could be bad for you or for wildlife to eat.

Heirloom- heirloom varieties are ones that have been around for generations. Using heirloom seeds can provide you with more options in terms of taste, color, and growing requirements than standard seeds. Some heirloom varieties have been selected over many generations to flourish in specific geographic areas or climate conditions.

Hybrid- hybrid seeds are crosses between two different varieties. Often, they have been bred for specific characteristics like appearance or vigor. This can make them appealing; however, if you want to save seeds from year to year, you should avoid hybrids. With natural pollination, it is impossible to know what type of plant will emerge from your fertilized seeds, and in some cases the plants are completely sterile.

GMO- genetically modified organisms are abundant in our food supply, but with a few exceptions (squash, zucchini) they are not yet prevalent among flower and vegetable garden seeds. GMOs have had their DNA altered, either by removing pieces or adding DNA from another species or variety. Many scientists have concerns about the environmental and ecological impacts of genetically modified plants, and research is still needed about the health and safety impacts of GMOs. Seeds that are labeled as USDA Organic are not genetically modified.

Native- while very few of the foods we consume are native to the United States, many garden herbs and flowers originated in the United States. Whenever possible, try to use seeds from plants that originated in your region of the country. Native plants often require much less care and attention than exotics, since they have adapted to local conditions. Additionally, local wildlife like bees and butterflies have co-evolved to interact with them, making them an important part of a healthy ecosystem.

Special Requirements- some seeds take a long time to germinate, while others require specific conditions in order to germinate. In Minnesota, many native plants require cold stratification, meaning they need to be exposed to cold temperatures for a certain number of days before they will begin to grow.

The Do It Green! Seed Library

The Do It Green! Seed Library provides vegetable and flower seeds to Twin Cities residents free of charge, offers opportunities for community members to swap seeds with each other, and distributes educational information on seed saving. The Seed Library serves the dual purpose of improving access to healthy, locally grown foods and promoting the use of native plants as a sustainable landscaping and gardening practice.

For more information, visit: DOITGREEN.ORG

