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Saving Seeds



High Summer is a good time for gardens! After all, these long days of sunshine and heat are just what tomatoes, melons, corn and cucumbers need to flourish, with some water added, of course. Same thing in the flower garden – marigolds and zinnias everywhere, even the roadsides have broken out in blooms.

Seeds probably are the furthest things from your gardening calendar right now – it's too late to plant summer crops and too early for the fall crops. But now, in the season of exuberant growth, is a good time to think about seeds – specifically about saving seeds for next year.

Hardly anyone saves seeds from African violets or orchids. Those seeds are almost microscopically small and require special care to germinate. And most of us will eat the coconut rather than plant it to produce a palm tree. We give little thought to the thousands of wheat seeds in our hamburger bun or the bean seeds in our hummus or the corn seeds in the tortilla. But most of us have favorite flowers that we save seeds from every year, maybe some that have been handed down from family members or long gone friends.

Seed saving is a good habit to get into. Maybe it is the heirloom tomato, or the sweetest melon or the brightest zinnia you want to perpetuate. Maybe it is the biggest vegetable or the flower that survived when all the others wilted from lack of water. Whatever the reason you want to save it, mark the plant so you don't forget which one it was you wanted to save. And be sure to save seed from plants that are disease and insect free. You don't want to save pests along with your seeds.



For purposes of seed saving, you will want to choose open pollinated varieties. These are usually labeled heirloom or heritage and have been grown for many generations. If you save seeds from these, you can expect vegetables or flowers like the plant that produced the seed.

Some of the plants that are considered most reliable for seed savers are sunflowers, peas, beans, peanuts, lentils, tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, okra and tomatillos. However, if you have grown the plants from hybrid seed, your plants next year will not be the same or the seed will not grow at all.

Some plants need pollen from another plant to set seed, a service provided by insects or the wind. One way to protect your seed from undesirable crosses is to plant only one variety of each vegetable. While your cucumbers will not cross with your melons, they will cross with other cucumbers if you are growing more than one variety close together.



Collecting seeds is easy, but saving them requires a little care. Many flowers produce their seeds in capsules or cups, such as the nigella, poppy, iris and daylily. Such seeds are easy to collect once they have dried on the plant. Vegetable seeds, on the other hand, are more often contained within the fruit or vegetable that we eat. To get the seeds, the vegetable must be left on the plant until it is completely mature. In the case of melons and winter squashes, that is the stage at which we eat them anyway.

After collecting the dry seed pods, heads, capsules or very ripe vegetables, you are ready to process and store the seed until the next planting season.

Peas, beans, corn, lettuce, okra and many herb and flower seeds are in the category suitable for dry processing. These seeds mature and dry on the plant and are then collected, cleaned, dried thoroughly and stored.



Seeds from tomatoes, melons, eggplants, cucumbers and other seed bearing vegetables and fruits are extracted using the wet processing method. The seeds are removed, washed and dried for storage. Tomato seeds should be removed from the fruit and fermented for three or four days before being washed and dried for storage.

As for storage, you should put each variety of seed in a separate container (a glass bottle with sealed top is best), but a paper envelope inside a glass canning jar or even a plastic bag will also work. Clear, complete labeling is very important. The best place to keep the seed is cold, dry and dark. Your refrigerator or freezer if you have space. Otherwise a cool dark corner of the basement works well.

Most of the seeds you save this summer and fall will be good to go come Spring. But if your storage conditions have not been ideal, you might do a germination test to determine their viability. To do this, select at least 10 seeds of the variety you want to check; put the seeds on a paper towel; roll up the towel, moisten thoroughly with water and put into a ziplock plastic bag. Label the bag with the seed name and date you put the seeds in it. Place the bag in a warm place and check occasionally that the towel is still moist.



Some seeds sprout quickly, so take a careful peek inside the paper towel after five days or so. If five of your ten seeds have sprouted, your germination rate is 50%. If no signs of life appear, reroll the paper towel and leave it for another few days. This exercise provides useful information in that it tells you whether or not your seeds are worth planting. The germination rate also tells you how thickly to space the seeds – you will need to plant more seeds if you have a low germination rate.

For more information and guidance on growing and saving seeds, check your library, where you will find several good books on the subject. In addition to having books on the subject, the Buckingham Library has a new seed library, where you can borrow seeds. At the end of the growing season, seed borrowers return seeds from the variety they borrowed or from another plant in their garden.

The Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners encourages you to consider saving seeds and sharing with other gardeners the special plants in your garden. Remember to save seeds from healthy plants; select seed from a number of plants of the same variety; store seeds correctly and always label with as much information as you can.

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*Photos submitted by Jill Baedke