

Saving Seeds

Q - I grew some great veggies and flowers this year and would like to save their seeds and grow them next year. Can you share basic seed saving tips?

A - Saving seeds from your own flowers and vegetables is a great way to connect with your garden by continuing to grow the crops you already love. You can also save money, support pollinators and trade seeds with fellow gardeners.

The most important thing to remember for saving seeds is that you can save “true-to-type” seed from open-pollinated plants but not hybrid varieties. That means your first step in saving seeds is to determine the type of plant you are growing. You can have open-pollinated or hybrid varieties in your garden. Open-pollinated plants depend on insects, wind, and birds for pollination. They include heirloom varieties and self-pollinating vegetables such as tomatoes, beans, and peas. Hybrids are typically a cross between two different varieties in a strictly controlled environment and are pollinated by artificial means. You may not always get the desired parental characteristics if you plant hybrid seeds. Hybrids will have an F1 designation on their seed packet.

One rule applies whether you are saving flower, herb, or vegetable seeds; optimal seed saving maturity is later than optimal crop maturity. Keep seeds from the best plant in the garden bed until the seed’s pods and heads dry out or the vegetables are fully ripe. Some vegetables, such as eggplants, should be left on the vine until they discolor and are past their optimum maturity. Sacrificing the biggest and the best will ensure quality seeds.

SAVING FLOWER SEEDS

As with vegetable seeds, collect flower seeds when they are “ripe” to increase the viability. Seeds are either produced in seed heads or in pods. Before harvesting, ensure the pods are dry and brittle, but still intact. When collecting seed heads, they should be dry, and the seed head should fall apart when you rub it between your fingers. If the seed head is still a nice green color, it is not ripe and should be allowed to continue to dry on the plant. It is best to harvest your seeds during clear and dry weather.

The first step in preparing your seeds is to allow them to dry out fully. This can be accomplished by spreading them out on a paper plate or paper towel in a warm, dry location. Once they are completely dry, they can be cleaned. Remove the pods and the seed heads by rubbing them gently between your fingers until they are broken apart. Separate the seeds from chaff (pods, etc.) by using a sieve, gently shaking, and blowing or remove the seeds using tweezers. Once the seeds are cleaned it is essential to store them properly. You can purchase small sealable envelopes from the craft store or repurpose paper envelopes saved from junk mail. Keep moisture at bay by putting the envelopes with the saved seeds in a glass jar and seal tightly. Small zip type plastic bags also work well. Store all seeds in a cool, dry place. Make sure to label each packet with the contents and date. Try to keep seeds for only one year to improve germination results.

SAVING VEGETABLE SEEDS

Saving vegetable seeds is not difficult but there are a few extra steps to follow. Tomato seeds have a gel covering that must be removed and is best done by fermentation. Fermenting the

seeds removes the gel, reduces some seed-borne diseases, and eliminates a germination inhibitor.

To do this, collect the seeds by cutting a ripe tomato in half and scooping out the seeds. Place them into a bowl, jar or glass with a label identifying the variety. Add about a half cup of water and set the bowl in a cool, dry place for three to five days. A moldy film will likely form on top of the liquid. This is normal and what you want to see. To separate these tomato seeds, first remove the film with a disposable spoon and then add more water and stir. The good seeds will sink. Pour off the water and debris. Repeat this step until the debris is gone and the seeds are clean. Spread onto a screen or paper plate to dry. Try not to use regular dinner plates or paper towels as this will cause seeds to stick &/or not dry as desired. Once seeds are completely dry, use the storage method described below.

Beans are another vegetable with seeds that are easy to save. Let the pods dry on the plant until they are brown and begin to open. Harvest the pods with bean seeds still inside and let dry for another two weeks. Shell the beans and store in an airtight container until next planting season. Storing dried beans in an airtight container prevents the development of bean weevil larvae that can damage the seed.

Saving seeds from eggplants, cucumbers and summer squash is more advanced. These vegetables must ripen beyond the normal, ready-to-eat stage so that viable seeds have time to develop. Allow these vegetables to over-ripen until they are discolored but not rotted. Cut the vegetable open and scoop the seeds into a bowl. Discard the remaining flesh. Cucumber seeds have a coating that must be removed. Rub the seeds inside a sieve while washing and then soak in water for two days. Rinse and dry. Once seeds are brittle enough to break, they are completely dry. If they still have bend in them the seeds are not dry enough. Once the seeds are dry, put them in an airtight container and store in a cool, dry, and dark location. A refrigerator is a good place to store dried seeds but remember to allow the seeds to return to room temperature before opening the container to prevent moist air from condensing on the seeds or container. You can repurpose a small packet of silica gel found in packaging from various consumer goods - put the silica gel packets in with the seeds to absorb moisture and help keep the seeds dry.

Seed saving is a rewarding part of gardening and if you are interested in researching the topic further, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville has a great website you can check out. The website includes information on selecting, germinating, and saving seeds. There are also videos to watch on seed saving. On the website, you can also find information on the Hodges and Pendergrass Seed Libraries. A seed library is system where seeds are acquired and shared among the community just like a traditional library. Seed libraries are a great source for heirloom and unusual varieties.

For info on saving seeds and seed libraries

<https://libguides.utk.edu/c.php?g=843122&p=6025891>

For Information on growing trees from seed

https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_agexfores/90/

A guide specific to vegetables

https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_agexgard/38/

Thanks for the great question and good luck saving seeds from your garden.
The Northeast Tennessee Master Gardeners