

What is the Right Time to Pick a Tomato for Seed Saving?

Q: I raise Granny Cantrell heirloom tomatoes. Each year I select a few of the nicely shaped “ripened on the vine” tomatoes from which I save next year’s seeds. I dry them on parchment paper so the seeds are easily removed and I store them in a paper envelope that is labeled with the year. Last year I selected a tomato, perhaps too late, whose seeds had begun to germinate inside the tomato. Is there an ideal time to pick a tomato to ensure the seeds will be at their peak? Ripe but not too ripe? A little green? Any advice on the saving of seeds?

A: The first answer to your questions about selecting a good tomato for seed saving is to choose a tomato that is ripe — but not too ripe — is best. The tomato should be soft but not mushy — and definitely not green.

I looked around and there are basically two ways of successfully saving tomato seeds. According to the websites below, and some of my fellow master gardeners, the “fermentation” method will work the best for your Granny Cantrell tomato seeds as well as for other heirloom tomatoes. This method sounded a bit daunting at first, but after talking this method over with another master gardener, I’m going to do this for some of my heirloom tomatoes.

To summarize the fermentation method:

1. Scrape seeds from your ripe tomato into a glass jar (include the water in the tomato) and add some water to fill the jar.
2. Cover the jar with a paper towel or thin cloth and watch for the seeds to drop to the bottom of the jar without the protective gelatin sacs. This may take 2-4 days. Keep the jar in a dark/cool place or they might start sprouting on you.
3. Once the protective gelatin sacs have worked away from the seeds, the process is finished, and you can remove the seeds from the jar. A fine mesh kitchen strainer works well for separating the seed from the liquid.
4. Place the seeds on a plate or piece of paper (they will stick to paper towels) and let them dry in a dimly lit place for 5-7 days.
5. Store the seeds in an unsealed glass jar in a dark, cool place until you plant them. A cool place could include a freezer or refrigerator.

The reason for the above process is to remove the anti-germination gel sac from around the seed.

If you don’t want to follow the steps above, you can try to remove the gel sac by drying out the seeds and rubbing the dried gel sac off the seed.

You will have less success with germination by not completely removing the gelatin sac around the seed.

Hopefully, that answered your questions. I am curious if you are successful with your method of saving seeds. From your question, it sounds like you got tomatoes this year from last year's crop. If so, I'll let some of my fellow gardeners know that this worked. Send us some pictures of your tomatoes to this email if you like.