

Save the Seeds!

Have you been thinking about becoming a seed-saver, but haven't had the time? Try it this year and, when you do, you'll not only be harvesting the fruits of your labor, but preserving a garden legacy for years to come.

Seed collection not only conserves 100 year-old Italian heirloom tomato plant varieties (or your favorite veggie or flower), but is also an educational and fun activity, and one that is sure to improve your own gardening proficiency, if explored.

Saving seeds completes the intended gardening cycle, rather than halting it at harvest. Leaving extra plants beyond harvest to mature and flower will also attract beneficial insects. So, by collecting seeds, we are supporting a natural lifecycle and strengthening our garden's ecosystem.

Seed may be collected from vegetables, annuals and perennials alike. Avoid hybrid or diseased varieties as hybrids do not reproduce like the parent, if at all, and you certainly don't want to perpetuate disease in your next year's crop. Always select seeds from the best plants.

Look for self-pollinators as the original variety is more easily preserved; if cross-pollinated by wind or insects, the resulting seed will not carry traits pure to the parent. A practice called "isolation" distances plants to reduce the chances of cross-pollination, but some varieties require more space than most homeowners have. Also, selecting plants with differing flowering times may help keep varieties true. Research the pollination methods of your selections to ensure the best chances of success!

Start simple and targeted with your selections. Build your knowledge and skills before tackling a greater volume of plants and varieties.

Along with heirloom or old-fashioned varieties, try these:

Vegetables: Beans, Tomatoes, Peppers, Lettuce

Annuals: Marigold, Morning glory, Snapdragon

Perennials: Veronica, Coneflower, Black-Eyed Susan, Milkweed

The Selection and Seeding Process

Select only mature seeds. Immature seeds are underdeveloped and cannot germinate. Allow flowers to mature and dry on the plant. Fruits must be permitted to ripen. Look for cream-colored or dark brown seeds as an indication of maturity. Pods or husks will be brown and dry.

There are generally two methods for separating seeds from their protective casings: Dry and Wet. The dry method is used for seed heads, pods and husks, while the wet method is used to separate seeds from fleshy fruit.

Dry Method: Snip off the flower head, or pick the pod or husk, and separate the seeds from the chaff, or waste debris. Tip: If the seeds are particularly small, collect the flower heads in a paper bag to avoid losing the seeds.

Wet Method: Scoop the gelatinous material containing the seeds and place with warm water in a jar, loosely covered, to ferment for three days, stirring daily. The good seeds will drop to the bottom and the bad seeds and waste pulp can be strained away and discarded.

After either method, dry the seeds on paper towels, newspaper or a strainer, and store only after becoming completely dry.

Store dry seeds in an envelope, paper bag or jar, and in a cool, dry place (like a refrigerator). Label with variety and date because, according to the University of Illinois Extension Office, most seeds should be used within three years to maximize viability. Corn, parsley and sweet corn are exceptions – they must be used within one year.

So, now before the growing season starts, consider saving seeds from those vegetables and flowers you routinely enjoy . . . or, perhaps a new variety can become a family heirloom. If seed-saving is new to you, give it a try this season!

<https://extension.illinois.edu/hortihints/0008c.html>

https://www.seedsave.org/issi/issi_904.html

<https://www.bhg.com/gardening/yard/garden-care/garden-seed-tips/>