

Saving and storing seed

GWF435

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Growing plants from your own seed can be satisfying and fun - and save money. Here's how to collect, prepare, clean and store seed to maximise your chances of success.

Q Why save seed?

A Saving money is the most obvious benefit of saving your own seed. Many vegetables, hardy annuals, shrubs and even trees can be raised from seed collected in your own garden. For gardeners who raise their own vegetables and bedding, or who are keen to increase their plant stocks, the savings can be substantial.

A particular benefit when saving seed from your own vegetables is that it allows you to be selective. By saving the beans from your longest pods, or the sweetest peas, you can select the characteristics you want in future plants. You can also save heritage varieties that are difficult to come by commercially.

Seeds are perishable and become less likely to germinate the longer they are stored, especially if stored in poor conditions. By collecting your own seeds you can ensure they are stored properly. You know that they are fresh, and can thereby maximise your chances of germinating them.

Some seeds, such as cyclamen and many tree seeds, germinate much better if sown as soon as they are ripe. Saving your own seed is a good way to obtain seed that is fresh enough to sow quickly and prevent dormancy.

Q What seeds can I collect?

A There is no reason why you should not collect seeds from any plant you choose. However, one thing to bear in mind is that, due to their breeding, variegated plants, named cultivars, and F1 hybrids will not grow true to type. The resultant plants will often be perfectly good, but may lack the desirable characteristics of the parent plants. The offspring from variegated plants will often be plain green, for example.

With the exception of self-fertile plants, such as tomatoes, many plants within the same species can interbreed with each other. This means that if you grow a number of brassicas, such as cabbage, cauliflower and sprouts in the same bed, they will pollinate each other. In turn, the plants that develop will be highly variable natural hybrids. Likewise with many ornamentals.

To overcome this problem you can cover the flowers with paper bags to physically prevent cross-pollination, and pollinate them by hand using a paintbrush with other plants of the same variety. You might even choose to deliberately cross-breed chosen varieties.

Q How should I collect seed?

A For the seeds to fully develop and ripen they need to remain on

the plant as long as possible, but must be collected before they naturally disperse. With most plants it is easy to tell when the seeds are ripening. The seedheads usually change colour from green to brown or black, and they become harder and brittle. As the seeds ripen they too change colour from white to brown or black and develop a thick shiny coat. In some cases, such as anemones and hepaticas, the seed remain green even when ripe, and should be sown straight away. With a few plants, such as hellebores, the seedheads remain green although the seeds inside are ripening, in which case, carefully pick open a seedhead and inspect the seed occasionally.

Some seedheads such as those of cranesbill and impatiens explode on ripening to disperse seed. You can pre-empt this by tying a paper bag over the seedhead before it is ripe to catch the seeds before they disperse.

As the seedheads ripen, cut them with a length of stalk and place them upside down in a paper bag. It is important to use paper and not plastic bags, to avoid condensation which leads to rotting.

With fruit-borne seed, such as tomato and aubergine, you need to allow the fruit to remain on the plant to become overripe and

soft, or become 'tough', for the seed inside to develop. Once the fruit has got to this stage it can be picked and the seeds removed.

Collecting seeds from leaf crops, such as cabbage or lettuce, involves allowing a couple of plants to grow on and develop flowers. In the case of biennial crops such as carrots, sprouts and cauliflower, this will involve allowing the plants to remain in the bed until the following year.

Q How should I prepare seeds for storage?

A Before seeds can be stored they need to be clean and dry to prevent rotting or disease spreading during storage. Remnant fruit pulp, seedhead, and flower debris can all cause such problems.

Having collected your seeds, allow them to dry in paper bags in a dry and well-ventilated place. However large seeds, especially tree seed, do not like to dry out and should be stored in damp sand. Large pods, such as beans, can be spread on trays to dry.

Once dry, the seeds should be cleaned. The method involved will depend on the nature of the seed and seedhead. Many small

seeds, such as poppies and aquilegias, fall freely from the seedhead when shaken and need little cleaning. Others, such as marigolds, need to be separated from the seedhead and have old flower debris removed.

Small seeds can be cleaned using a sieve, whereas large ones can be picked clean by hand or with tweezers.

Seeds in pods, such as beans, should be shelled. Hard outer cases can be gently crushed with a rolling pin and the seeds taken out.

Most fruit-borne seeds will be moist when first collected; to prevent them rotting, they should be allowed to dry out on a kitchen towel. Some fruit-borne seeds, such as tomato, have a protective mucus around the seed which inhibits germination. This should be washed off by soaking the seed in tepid water and then drying on a plate, or piece of glass, prior to storage.

Damaged, unripe, and small seeds should be rejected as they are unlikely to germinate and could spread disease to healthy seeds and seedlings.

Q How should I store the seed?

A Once clean, seed should be carefully packed in envelopes, or cloth bags for larger seed. Label

with the plant name and date they were harvested. Seed can also be stored in airtight containers, such as jars or tins, but add a small amount of silica gel in the bottom to absorb atmospheric moisture. The storage conditions should be cool and dry. A garage, spare bedroom, or even the bottom of the fridge are good places to store seed. It is worth occasionally checking your stored seeds to ensure they are not decaying, being eaten, or damaged in any other way.

Exchanging seeds

If you enjoy saving your own vegetable seeds and would like to exchange them for other vegetable seeds, Garden Organic, formally called HDRA, runs a Heritage Seed Library. The library is a source of many old vegetable varieties that can no longer be bought.

For more details on the library, contact them on 024 7630 3517 or write to Garden Organic, Garden Organic Ryton, Coventry, Warwickshire CV8 3LG
www.gardenorganic.org.uk

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