



Save your seeds!

Save money by saving seeds from your favourite plants *By Gillian Carson*


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What did we do before seed merchants offered us a boggling array of seed in brightly coloured seed packets on revolving shop stands? We did what gardeners the world over did for centuries before that – we saved our seed!

Seed saving had fallen from favour somewhat in the last century. Since the Victorians cornered the seed market and made it easier for us to buy seed rather than save it, we have been happily taking advantage of the convenience.

But seed saving is on the up and, as it's so easy to do, many gardeners are finding that it's the best and cheapest way to stock up on seed.

The advantages to saving your own seed are hard to ignore. The seed you get will be fresher and therefore more viable (likely to germinate) than the seed you buy in the shops. You will also be saving the seed of plants that already

do well in your climate and particular conditions that your garden offers. Lastly, it's free! You are also likely to end up with a lot more seed than you actually need and so you'll have a nice little stockpile with which you can trade seed with your friends and neighbours.

Now it seems like madness to buy seed from the shops, right? Well, there are downsides to saving your own seed. Some plants will cross-pollinate with other plants and need to be isolated in order to get seed that will produce a new plant that is 'true to type', as we will see later.

WHEN TO SAVE

Usually you collect seed when a plant has flowered and produced fruit. For example, you would collect tomato seed from inside a ripe tomato. This would be similar for fruiting vegetables like courgettes, pumpkins, aubergines, chillies etc.

Some plants flower and produce seed pods from the



► flower. Examples of this would be carrots, coriander, leeks, etc. Others actually produce seeds that are the edible parts of the plant, like peas, runner beans, sweetcorn and french beans. When the seeds appear depends on when your plant ripens, but many seeds are collected at the end of the growing season in September and early October.

BEGINNERS

If you have never collected seed before, start with something easy. Ideally, choose a vegetable that is self-fertile – that means that it pollinates its own flowers and does not rely on insects or wind to pollinate it. In this case, it is less likely that your seed will not be true to type. Here are a few easy plants to save seed from.

French Beans

French Beans are self-fertile and so pollinate their own flowers. Choose a strong, healthy plant to grow on for seed. Leave the pods on the plant until they start to dry out. If the weather gets wet, bring in the pods to a shed for further drying. Wait until the you can hear the seeds rattling inside the pod before you shell them. Leave them out in a dry, frost-free area to dry out further. Then store them in an airtight container.

Peas

Peas are very easy to save seed from because, like french beans, they are self-fertile and very likely to give you seed that is true to type. The seed is collected in the same way as French Beans but if the weather is wet, you can of course pull up the whole plant and bring it into the shed or greenhouse for drying.

Tomatoes

Tomatoes are easy to save seed from and because many of them have closed flowers that don't let insects in (exceptions are usually currant-type tomatoes) they are self-fertile.

Coriander

Choose a plant that has been growing strongly all summer and avoid those plants that are early to bolt. Allow the plant to set seed and then leave it in the ground until the seed has gone brown. Then, cut the stalks off with the seeds at the end and place them in a paper bag for further drying. After a few weeks, shake the bag and the seeds should come away from the stalks. Store in the paper bag.

ABOVE seeds harvested from sweetcorn

Seed Savers
 Real Seed Co.
www.realseeds.co.uk
 Seed Guardians
www.gardenorganic.org.uk/hsl/guardians.php

Isolating Plants for Seed Saving

Some plants, like aubergines and chillies, need to be isolated if you are to collect seed that is true to type. You can buy isolation units but they tend to be expensive and are quite easily made at home with a little know-how.

Simply push some canes into the ground around your plant and measure the width and height of the area you need to isolate. Then buy some fabric with a fine mesh. Net curtains work well. Simply sew the edges together to make a box, making sure you leave extra long lengths at ground level. Then place over the canes and plant and weight the edges down with rocks, ensuring there are no holes.

INTERMEDIATE SAVING

Some vegetables are slightly more time-consuming when it comes to seed-saving as they may have a biennial habit and only flower once every two years. For these types of plants planning is the key as you will need to make space in your garden for plants that are grown for their seed only.

Carrots

Carrots are a good example of a biennial crop. Leave the roots in the ground over winter and mulch them if the weather is especially cold. The next spring, the roots will flower and you can collect seed from them in the same way as for coriander. Carrots are insect-pollinated, so don't grow two different varieties for seed-saving. They can also cross-pollinate with wild carrot (Queen Anne's Lace) so watch out for white roots in subsequent generations and simply remove them.

Basil

Basil flowers are pollinated by insects too, but because lots of people let their basil plants flower, you will need to ensure that there are not other varieties of basil within about 150 feet of yours. This can be difficult on an allotment or where your garden is near to your neighbour's. Let the flowers turn brown and dry up, then harvest the flower stalks and shake them into a bag.

Parsley

Parsley acts in a similar way to carrots. It flowers in its second year and will produce seed shortly after that. Harvest in the same way as carrot seed but be aware that flat leaf and curly leaf varieties will cross-pollinate, so only grow one for seed per year.

ADVANCED SAVING

There are a few plants for which seed-saving is not for the faint-hearted. One of those is the pumpkin and all of its relatives (courgettes, melons, cucumbers etc). Pumpkins have large flowers which are very attractive to insects. They will readily cross-pollinate with each other and produce some weird-looking fruits that are neither pumpkin nor



Recommended Books

Back Garden Seed Saving by Sue Stickland, £9.90

Here Sue Stickland (of Real Seeds) provides all the information that you could need in a simple, accessible format: why save your own seed, basic seedsaving techniques, followed by crop by crop instructions for each individual vegetable.



Complete Guide to Saving Seeds by Robert Gough, £16.99

The seed-saving bible, this book not only covers vegetables but also fruit, flowers, trees and shrubs. It covers over 300 varieties and how to select plants for the best seeds, plus advice on harvesting and cleaning, proper storage and care.



BELOW Seeds harvested from dried pea pods

courgette and taste awful. To avoid this you will need to hand-pollinate your pumpkin or grow it in isolation (see boxout).

To hand-pollinate, choose a female flower (one with a small swelling beneath it) that is about to open and put a rubber band over the petals to stop it opening. The next day, pick a male flower (one with just a straight stalk) and remove the petals. Open the female flower and rub the pollen from the male onto the female. Replace the rubber band on the female flower and tie a piece of string around the stalk to remind you that you hand-pollinated it.

This should develop into a pumpkin that is true to type for that particular variety. Once the pumpkin is mature, cut it open, wash and dry the seed and keep in a dry place.

The amount of seed-saving that anyone can do is clearly dictated by size of garden, time and willingness to go the extra mile. But even if you only save the seed from one plant seeing the life-cycle of a plant through from seed to harvest and back to seed again is what gardening is really all about.

