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Start Saving Seeds This Summer




By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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If you've had some success in your garden this year, you might be ready to take things to the next level by [propagating](#) plants for your garden next year. Saving seeds is one of the easiest propagation methods for common garden plants. It can save money, improve the quality of your garden, and it supports [crop diversity](#) and food sovereignty. It's also incredibly satisfying to collect seeds from a plant you grew from seeds you collected last year.

Benefits of Seed Saving

Growing [plants from seed](#) can be much less expensive than purchasing starts, especially if you don't have to buy new seeds every year. Collecting seeds from your most successful plants every year is a form of selective breeding. Over time, your seeds will adapt to the specific microclimates of your own garden. This results in a more vigorous garden.

Maintaining [open-pollinated](#), locally adapted plant varieties also reduces reliance on corporations. As seed production has become commercialized in the 20th century, the U.S. [lost over 90%](#) of its fruit and vegetable varieties. If you've ever discovered that your favorite variety has been discontinued, you know how valuable it is to have your own stash of seeds. But by saving those seeds, you are also preserving [biodiversity](#) – both the genetic diversity of horticultural varieties and the biodiversity of pollinators and other garden wildlife. If you are growing vegetables, seed saving reduces your reliance on long-distance food distribution networks and enhances local [food resilience](#).

Most people will be satisfied just growing their own collected seeds. But experienced seed savers can participate in formal preservation efforts. Outside of places like the [Doomsday Vault](#) where seeds are kept in subzero temperatures indefinitely, smaller seed banks must routinely grow and reproduce their collections to keep them viable. Seed banks like [Native Seeds/SEARCH](#) or [Seed Savers Exchange](#) provide gardeners with the opportunity to be part of that process.

How To Save Seeds

Before saving seeds, make sure that the variety you are growing is not patented. New flower and vegetable varieties [may be protected](#) by patents. Although no one is likely to patrol your raised beds for illegally germinated sprouts, F1 hybrids and [GMO seeds](#) may be sterile or not grow [true to seed](#). This is not an issue if you are growing [heirloom varieties](#) or seeds from a [seed library](#), which should vet varieties before offering them.

For all seed types, resist harvesting seeds too soon. Flowers will be spent and edible fruits will be overripe before seeds fully mature. Methods for collecting seeds depend on the plant. Farmer's Almanac provides a [useful guide](#) for the most popular vegetables. Some plants, like peas, beans, and mustard, are extremely easy. They produce hard, round seeds in pods. Simply wait to pick and shell the pods until they are dry and papery. Many plants, like lettuce, carrots, and old-fashioned annual flowers produce obvious [seed heads](#) after flowering. The seeds of most summer vegetables, including peppers, eggplant, cucumbers, and squash, must be removed from inside the edible fruit. Tomato and cucumber seeds are covered in a mucus-like gel that inhibits germination. You will need to [remove](#) that coating by soaking the seeds before washing and drying them for storage.





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How To Store Seeds

It's important to clean and dry the ripe seeds before you store them. Once properly prepared, the key to saving seeds is to maintain cool, dry conditions. Each container should contain only one type of seed; label the container with the variety and the date. One of the most common storage systems is breathable paper envelopes collected in a sealed container with silica gel to prevent mold.

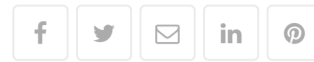
Small cardboard containers can work well for bulkier seeds like beans. If you have collected a large quantity of a single variety, you can use glass jars for storage. Most seed collections can be stored in a basement or closet where temperatures remain fairly constant. Smaller seeds known to be short-lived, like carrots, parsnip, onions, and leeks, may last longer if you store them in a freezer. But most seeds will reliably survive storage for a year or two. After that, germination rates begin to drop, but some seeds will last up to five years or more.

Advanced Seed Saving

The basics of seed saving are fairly straightforward. A casual gardener may not mind the occasional failure and may enjoy discovering surprising new hybrids. But a fully self-propagated garden or seed preservation project requires a bit more planning. Isolation requirements to prevent cross-pollination between varieties or closely related species can vary from a few feet up to half a mile. To keep your garden true to seed, grow only a single variety of the plants you want to propagate.

If you're looking for more information on seed saving, Organic Seed Alliance provides a [seed saving guide](#) with cultivation practices, germination rates, and wet vs. dry seeding. For even more in-depth reading, consider [The Seed Garden – The Art & Practice of Seed Saving](#) or [The Seed Saving Bible](#).

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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