

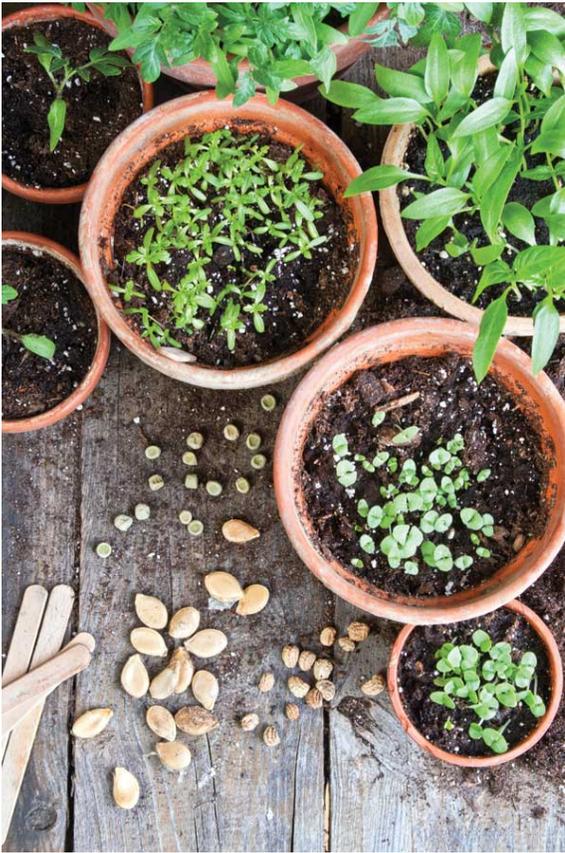
The Basics of Seed Saving

Take greater control over your food sources—and save some money—by learning to preserve your own garden seeds.

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By William Woys Weaver



If you're a beginner, start with some of the easiest plants to grow such as lettuces and radishes.

Photo By Fotolia

Saving seeds is like putting money in the bank. It's a great project for kids, it's challenging, and it opens your eyes to the inner poetry of nature. Best of all, saving your own seeds is one sure way to regain control of your family's source of food.

We now know that since the 1950s, commercially raised fruits and vegetables have [declined dramatically in nutritional value](#). Lingering ills of pesticides and the chemicals used to prolong their shelf life are also concerns with commercially raised food. Growing your own food is also a lot cheaper. Since the economic crash a few years ago, these concerns have come together to spawn a huge shift in home gardening—a real return to basics.

Beginners can be bombarded with the vast amounts of contradictory gardening information floating around on the Internet. Speaking from some 50 years of experience, I can say that there is no better way to learn seed saving than finding a mentor who can walk you through the complexities of saving your own seed. Firsthand experience cannot be replaced by books. But even if you don't have a mentor, keen observation and a little dose of patience are two reliable tools you can count on when starting out. Without a doubt, it is important to start your learning curve with the highest quality seeds possible because you want to cultivate healthy plants that represent the best of their type. These "best" traits are passed down through the seeds.

Choosing Plants for Seed Saving

The old-time art of seed saving and careful seed selection has mostly gone the way of quill pens, a sad commentary on the state of American agriculture and the craftsmanship that once made us leaders in this field. However, because the number of businesses selling quality seeds has declined for a variety of reasons, many people have turned to saving their own seeds. Before you join the new crop of seed savers, you need to know that all seeds are not equal. There are three kinds of seeds today—and some come with built-in issues that work against seed saving.

GM seeds, or genetically modified seeds, are seeds that have been created under artificial conditions to meet a specific list of criteria, usually resistance to a package of pesticides and herbicides sold with them. The home gardener is not likely to come across this type of seed because at the moment GM seed is mostly confined to large-scale commercial agriculture. GM seeds are also patented, which means you cannot legally reproduce it unless you pay the maker a royalty. Without belaboring the arguments pro or con about GM seeds, you should avoid buying any seeds that are patented. Most seed packets will state very clearly whether they contain patented material. (To read more about GM food, check out the article [The Truth About GMOs](#).)

Another type of patented seeds are the F1 hybrids, crosses between different plant species. You cannot save seeds from hybrids because they will not grow true to type. Hybrids are common in seed catalogs everywhere and must be listed as such. After World War II, a few seed companies got the lucrative idea that F1 hybrids were better than traditional seeds and thus began to market them based on perceived benefits, primarily that the cross would have some special trait, such as wilt resistance. More importantly (to the companies marketing them), because you cannot save seeds from F1 hybrids, you have to keep buying new seed. F1 hybrids eventually lose their special traits, and companies must create new ones every few years to adjust for this decline. The seedless watermelon is a good example. It is a patented food because the seeds have been bred out, which is not natural, and the cross is not stable. Indeed, it will produce no viable seed. I call them "neutered fruit with neutered flavor."

A third type of seed—and the only one you can save—is old-fashioned open-pollinated seed. This means that nature did the pollinating: bees, wind, birds, dew or rain. These seeds are the most "natural," with no intervention by humans, and can be further divided into heirlooms and nonheirlooms. Heirloom varieties have been around for several generations and have thus proven their worth; they are true hand-me-downs like the tasty and attractive 'Moon and Stars' watermelon developed in the 1920s. Nonheirlooms are more recent open-pollinated plants, such as the 'Green Zebra' tomato developed in the 1980s, that are heading toward the heirloom category.

Nuts & Bolts of Seed Saving

Saving seeds requires fairly strict rules because plants will cross-pollinate, which means that tomatoes planted too close together will cross and next year's seeds will produce a bizarre array of unrecognizable fruit. Suzanne Ashworth's guidebook *Seed to Seed* and my own [Heirloom Vegetable Gardening](#) (available as a CD) will provide basic advice about spacing so that you can avoid unwanted crosses. My personal advice is to start simple: Take on a few plants that are easy to grow (such as lettuces or radishes), master their seed-saving techniques, then move on to more complex challenges such as cabbages or leeks.

All garden seeds are divided into three types: annuals, biennials and perennials. Annuals produce seed and die at the end of the season. Their seeds must be selected and saved for the following year. Biennials, such as beets, carrots and cabbages, must be overwintered in a safe place because they bloom and produce seed the following spring. Because this sometimes requires digging up the best plants and storing them in a frost-free environment, place biennials on the list of seed-saving tasks to tackle later, once you're up to speed on the annuals. Perennial plants, such as asparagus, horseradish, strawberries and rhubarb, return on their own each year, so seed saving is not an imperative.

Regardless of plant type, one rule is universal: The seed must ripen on the plant in order to ensure best rate of germination. This means your peppers must turn red, orange or yellow (whichever color when fully ripe), your eggplants and cucumbers need to turn yellow, your beans and peas must be "rattle dry" in their pods, and your corn must be left on the stalks until the husks turn paper-brown. Pumpkins, watermelons and melons must be vine-ripe; keep them a few weeks longer in a dry place until they are almost rotten.

In fully ripe foods, the seeds have drawn out as much energy as possible from the fruit. The secret to saving good seed is getting every bit of ripeness into the seed because this represents stored energy from the sun. Then, once you have saved seed, clean it and allow it to dry thoroughly. Seed that is not absolutely dry when stored will develop mold, which will kill it. Some seeds, such as tomato seeds, need to be soaked in water before being cleaned and dried. (Read more about drying seeds in the article [How to Save Seeds: Drying Seeds for Storage](#).)

Dry seed should be put away in airtight containers in a dark, cool place until needed—always date the container. Some seeds will keep for many years and if you want to prolong their life, you can freeze them. This past season I grew Native American corn from seed frozen in 1996 and it achieved 100 percent germination. It was nice payback for the work that went into growing that rare seed.

The bottom line is this: Seed saving is an investment. It is an investment of your time, an investment in your food supply and personal health, and it is an investment in the future. It is life put on hold for your eventual benefit. As long as we keep the ability to save seed in the hands of everyday folks like you and me, we will also keep the control over our food supply where it belongs: under our own roofs.

Learn More About Seed Saving

- Order high-quality seeds, learn more about heirloom plants, and share and exchange seeds with other seed preservationists with [Seed Savers Exchange](#).
- Learn more about how to save different kinds of seeds and get clever strategies on taking care of saved seeds so they'll last as long as possible in the *Mother Earth News* article [Savvy Seed Care](#).
- Buy writer William Woys Weaver's CD [Heirloom Vegetable Gardening](#).

- Try saving seed from 10 easy-to-grow, delicious garden veggies in our [beginner seed savers challenge](#).