

SEED SAVING: Info from the Hudson Valley Seed Company



As they say, no farms, no food. As a gardener, you can start to gain insight by learning to save seeds for your own garden. No seeds, no gardens! Today, with the tragic continued loss of genetic diversity and corporate patenting of seeds, saving and celebrating heirloom and open-pollinated seeds is more important than ever. The best way to get started is by doing.

Here are some basic seed saving tenets.

1: Be curious.

Seed saving used to be an integral part of many farms and gardens. Saving seeds was as practiced and assumed as harvesting a ripe tomato. Over time, as the landscape of seeds has changed from the intimate to the industrial, growers became so used to purchasing seed that we began to lose both the diversity of varieties as well as the skills needed to save seeds at home. It has not gotten more difficult to save seeds over the last 10,000 years, just less common. You don't need a degree to save a seed. All the practice requires is some curiosity, observation, and a desire to become a better gardener.

2: Be patient.

As gardeners, we're used to interrupting our plants at their most delicious or beautiful moments. A flower just before its peak that's perfect for picking. Cherry tomatoes hanging heavy all too ready to pop in your mouth. But these moments occur before the plant's full life-cycle has played out. What would your carrot do if you never pulled it up out of the ground? Before you plant, think about what you want to save seeds from. Before you eat, think about saving some seeds. It may take a little self-discipline not to gobble up your harvest, but it'll be worth it.

3: Be experimental.

If you've never tried saving seeds or are feeling like you don't know where to begin, the best place to start is with your plants. Let them go. By that I mean let them grow. Choose a few plants that you will let live their entire life cycle. By letting it go you will gain a better understanding of the plant, experience the joy of nurturing it through its full life, and get to see what it needs to do to produce seed. You may not get a ton of seed, or any at all, but your first part of your seed collection is collecting plant knowledge.

4: Be the bee.

Seed saving is about a balance of intimacy and isolation. There is closeness between the bees and the plants that we all secretly envy. When you become a seed saver you become the bee. Once you graduate from beginning seed saver to avid seed saver you will need to get more familiar with pollination. Since you are working with heirloom and open-pollinated varieties, they can cross pollinate. Your sweet peppers can cross with hot peppers and take on some heat the next year. Your butternut squash can cross with your cheese pumpkin: and it might not be that tasty! Bees don't care, but we do. By learning to be the bee we can begin to understand plants' pollination needs.

5: Start with good seed.

To save seeds that will grow true to type, be sure to select from heirloom or open-pollinated varieties. Seed saved from hybrid tomatoes will not grow true but will produce offspring with a wide range of dissimilar characteristics.

6: Connect and share.

Some of the best resources for learning about gardening and seed saving are other gardeners in your neighborhood. Ultimately, one person saving seeds in their own garden is not enough to turn the tide of corporate control of seeds and loss of heirloom and open-pollinated varieties. By coming together as gardeners and sharing our saved seeds through seed libraries, swaps, and exchanges, we can make a difference.

Save your seeds and bring them to a **Seed Swap** on the 2nd Thursday of September (9-14) at the **2nd Street Farmers' Market**, 194 2nd St., Amherst.



Heirloom Tomatoes

OBSERVE Start by eyeing a few of your best looking fruits as they mature on the vine. It's best to save seeds from your top performers, so you may even want to sneak a little bite first to make sure you're saving seeds from your best-tasting tomatoes.

PREPARE Once you've selected the fruit from which you'll make salsa and save seed, gather together a glass jar, a metal strainer, an unwaxed paper plate or coffee filter, and an air-tight container.

PROCESS Let your tomatoes ripen on the vine or even start to go a little soft.

- Pick the tomatoes from different plants.
- Slice the tomatoes in quarters and squeeze the pulp and seeds into the jar. Make sure to keep varieties separate and labeled.
- Set aside the fleshy portions of the tomatoes for a salsa or soup.
- Add to the jar the same amount of water as pulp.
- Let the pulp/water mixture sit for three to five days or until a smelly layer of white mold has formed on the surface. Don't eat this stuff.
- Skim off the mold; rinse seeds in strainer until clean.
- Place seeds on paper plate, label, and let air dry. If the weather is humid and stagnant, provide a fan to help with air circulation. For small batches you can let the seeds dry right in the strainer.
- Store dry seeds in a labeled, air-tight container in a cool, dark place.
- Plant your seeds next season! Tomato seeds, when kept cool dark and dry can last for 3-4 years.

A note on Cross-Pollination There are different opinions as to how often different varieties of tomatoes cross with each other. In general, regular leaf tomatoes cross less and potato leaf and cherry varieties cross more. The recommended isolation distance between varieties is 25 to 50 feet. However, many home gardeners successfully collect seed in tight spaces. Give it a try!

Heirloom Peppers

OBSERVE Start by eyeing a few of your best-looking plants/fruits as they mature on the vine. It's best to save seeds from your top performers, so you may even want to sneak a little bite first to make sure you're saving seeds from your best-tasting peppers.

PREPARE Once you've selected the fruit from which you'll save seed, gather together a cutting board, sharp knife, gloves, strainer, unwaxed paper plate or coffee filter.

PROCESS Let your peppers fully ripen on the vine.

- Pick the peppers from different plants.
- Cut the top off of bell and stuffing peppers and pull out the seed crown. For hot peppers wear gloves and slice lengthwise and scrape out the seeds with a small spoon. (*There's nothing worse than chopping up hot peppers and then rubbing your eye or picking your nose.*) Make sure to keep varieties separate and labeled.
- Set aside the fleshy portions of the peppers for salsa—you don't need them for seed-saving.
- Rinse seeds gently and place seeds on paper plate, label, and let air dry. If the weather is humid and stagnant, provide a fan to help with air circulation. For small batches you can let the seeds dry right in the strainer.
- Store dry seeds in a labeled, air-tight container in a cool, dark place.
- Plant your seeds next season! Pepper seeds, when kept cool dark and dry and last for 3-4 years or more.

A Note on Cross-Pollination Peppers will cross-pollinate freely in the garden. As the "hot gene" is dominant, sweet peppers that cross with hot peppers tend to inherit some heat. In order to make sure that the peppers don't cross, you need to isolate them from each other. There are a few ways to accomplish this.

Distance Isolation distances range from 50 ft to one mile. Smaller distances are more for home gardeners saving seed for themselves with limited space vs. larger distances for seed companies growing commercial seed on expansive farms. Many of the gardeners in the Seed Library have small gardens and don't have even 50 feet of separation between varieties.

Caging We recommend caging peppers. Caging is a simple way of preventing insects from visiting flowers between varieties. You can use your own creativity and simple materials to make an isolation cage. Cages can be made in any shape out of materials that let in sun and rain such as screening. We use row cover, which also has some insulating properties. The peppers love to be hot!

Other Ingredients

Cilantro This herb (*loved by some, loathed by genetically jilted others*) is a two-for-one deal. When your cilantro bolts, let it go. It will grow tall, flower, attract beneficial insects to your garden, and then form jade green beads. These will turn brown and dry on the plant. Harvest them and you've got coriander for spice and seeds to plant in the fall. Keep in mind that cilantro is not so tasty after it bolts. Try succession sowing (*planting seeds every few weeks*) so that there are always some that are edible and some going to seed.

Scallions These quick growing onions are biennials just like most other alliums. That means that while they will grow and produce pungent fodder their first year, they will not flower and go to seed until the following season. For gardeners in cold climates, that means allowing the plants to go dormant for the winter. The following season the plants will grow back and form globe-shaped flowers. When the flowers fade, small lobed pods will form. When the pods dry and the first seeds start to fall out, harvest the seed heads. Allow to dry for a few days, then thresh by rubbing seed heads together between your hands.

Garlic You can save seeds from garlic, but when someone is talking about planting seed garlic they are actually referring to cloning. It sounds sci-fi, but it's not like cloning sheep: garlic naturally reproduce this way. All it means in this case is saving some of your individual cloves to replant. Choose your biggest, healthiest cloves, split them up, and replant in the fall. They'll come up next spring.

Watermelon It's best to grow just one variety when aiming to save seeds. For northeast gardeners we recommend Sugar Baby or Blacktail Mountain, both smaller, shorter season melons. Grow as you normally would. Harvest when ripe. Eat, enjoy, and invest in a spittoon. That's about all it takes!