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## Saving Seeds, Saving Memories

By Dawn Pettinelli

If you enjoy growing plants from seeds, why not try your hand at seed saving? Aside from reducing your gardening costs by not having to purchase all new seed each year, there are plenty of other reasons to partake of this rewarding activity.

First and foremost is the preservation of older varieties. How many of us have grandparents or other relatives or neighbors who grow vegetables and flowers from seeds brought over from their native countries? Grown for their flavor, beauty or usefulness, over the years these varieties have become adapted to local conditions. Unless they are preserved, the genetic diversity they offer will be lost. A few seed-saving organizations, like Seed Savers Exchange, are doing a remarkable job perpetuating heirloom plants, but we can all help with this endeavor.

Also, as newer hybrids become available, less popular varieties are often taken off the shelves. Seed companies can only carry so many offerings and remain profitable. If you are particularly fond of the flavor of a certain pea or tomato, or the color, scent or growth habit of a special flower, you will do well to collect seed to replant each year.

Finally, there are those truly enamored with the idea of a self-perpetuating garden. Whatever your reason, seed saving does not require too much extra effort or time.

Seeds can only be saved from non-hybrid plants. A hybrid is the result of a carefully controlled cross between two different parent plants. Since they require extra work to produce, they are typically more expensive than open-pollinated types. Hybrid seeds do offer gardeners many benefits. Often they carry improved disease resistance, growth habits, colors and so forth. But if you save the seeds of hybrid plants, they will not come true to type. They may resemble their parents, or something totally different. If you want to grow hybrid varieties, new seed must be purchased each year.

Flower seeds are generally easier for the beginner to save than vegetable seeds because many vegetables are either biennial or require some processing first. Annuals offer less room for failure than perennials. While

seeds of both might be collected with little difficulty, some perennials prove stubborn to germinate unless specific cultural conditions are met.

I find marigolds, cosmos, snapdragons, petunias, nasturtiums, zinnias, four o'clocks, tithonias and sunflowers to be pretty fail-proof. Do realize that if you have a mixed color planting of say, zinnias and you just save the seeds of the red ones, you are likely to get other colors as well. This is because bees will cross pollinate your plants. Serious seed savers can resort to hand pollinating, caging or isolating varieties to keep them true to type.

Let the seeds ripen on the plant. Collect the dried flower heads or seed pods before they start falling apart. Break open over some clean paper and pick out as much debris as you can. Let your seeds dry in an airy place for a few days. If possible, store seeds in labeled air-tight containers. Empty pill bottles work well. Small envelopes are fine if you can put them in a lidded glass jar, plastic storage container or Ziploc bag. Ideally, seeds should be kept in a cool, dry place.

If you want to save seeds from a non-hybrid tomato, select a fruit that is fully ripe. Scoop out the seeds and pulp into a bowl and add about two times as much water. Stir and let sit for about three days, stirring at least twice a day.

This fermentation process removes the gel sack surrounding the seed which inhibits germination. The top layer in the bowl may become moldy and stink. Add more water, stir and pour the debris off the top. Viable seeds will sink to the bottom. Rinse with water until only clean seeds remain. Let them air dry and store. Since tomatoes tend to self-pollinate, you generally do not need to worry about cross pollination. For other vegetables, you might want to check out some books on seed saving. "Seed to Seed" by Susan Ashworth is one of my favorites.

Seed saving can be both educational and rewarding, and now is the perfect time to start your collecting as both fruits and flowers are maturing. For questions on seed saving or on other horticultural topics, contact us the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at 877-486-6271, visit [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.