



Seed Saving Guide

seeds are meant to disperse

Christina Battle [version three, summer 2024]

This zine was initially made in the late summer of 2020 around harvest time, when I was contemplating the ways that seed saving makes space for thinking about the future. Saving seeds helps me to reflect, but also to prepare: for future gardens; future weather; future expectations; and future potentials.

It also helps me carry through the winter. I harvest seeds throughout the summer and fall, but leave much of the processing for after the snow hits. Seed processing can be a tedious and repetitive act - which I find perfect for the cold darkness of winter. As I separate, sift, and sort through seeds, it helps me look forward to the spring to come - I think about it in terms of preparation. This publication is meant as a sort of how-to guide to help you think more about seeds and how to save them; with the hope that it will also help you get thru winter and prepare for the spring.

This year, four years on from the initial publication, I'm thinking even more about food security - something that has always been at the heart of the *seeds are meant to disperse* project, but is more acutely present. As inflation (we might better consider it price gouging) has meant the access to food - especially fresh produce - is becoming more restrictive, I'm thinking more about the ways that saving seeds can help individuals and communities supplement their needs. As never-ending wars and the impacts of climate change continue to threaten the many seed vaults across the globe, the saving and sharing of seeds becomes more valuable. We're not going to solve this crisis individually, but I do think the collective and societal shifts we need begin with reframing our individual thinking. I propose that saving seeds can help us practice the future together.

It's now the start of spring and after an extremely warm winter with little precipitation, there is much speculation about what to expect this coming summer. Here in Alberta, extreme drought warnings have already begun, water advisories continually issued, and the start of wildfire season called 10 days early.

Within this document are tips about saving seeds from a variety of vegetables. I continue to learn from plants and from others about strategies for growing and preparing for future gardens, and I hope you'll consider not only saving your own seeds but finding ways to share them with others as well.

- Christina (early spring, 2024)

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOME BASICS.

I like to think that much of seed saving is intuitive - plants want to grow, they want to disperse and spread out - you can learn a lot by just watching how a particular plant spreads seeds on its own. There are some botanical things that are helpful to know, though - especially if you want to access the many seed-saving books and resources out there (there are lots of resources online - one book that I get endless use out of is "The Seed Garden" published by the Seed Savers Exchange) - this zine prioritizes some of the basics.

One thing to keep in mind is that, in seed saving terms, many of the vegetables we grow are actually classified as fruits based on how they reproduce, and the terms are often used interchangeably. With veggies easily classified as fruits - like tomatoes and peppers - its easy to see the seeds that will need saving. But others - like greens and root vegetables - are less familiar to most since we don't often see or utilize their flowers and inevitable seeds. Fruits fall into two categories when it comes to seed saving: fleshy (like tomatoes or cucumbers - which require a wet process) or dry (like beans or lettuce).

I'm not going to get into the issue of maintaining varieties through distance too much here, but just be aware that, if some cross pollination has occurred in your garden across varieties, the seeds you save and grow again anew might not produce exactly how you expect. My only advice is - be open to it! It can be a great and mysterious learning process!

Timing is one of the most important things to be aware of when planning to save seeds: for fleshy fruits, make sure to wait until fruits have fully matured before saving (let those tomatoes turn their ultimate colour to ensure the seeds have fully developed); for dry fruits, hold off picking pods until they are completely dry - almost to the point of cracking (leave a few bean pods to dry out before harvesting for seed).

Processing methods vary - I'll focus on a few specific examples but, in general, if the fruit is of a similar sort, the method for saving seeds will also be similar. Save your seeds in a cool, dry location. I save mine in sealed, glass jars stacked and stored in the basement.

BEANS and **PEAS** produce dry seeds. Instead of harvesting all of your growing pods, plan to let a few dry out and go to seed. The beans will harden when they're ready (usually in late fall).



TOMATOES are great for seed saving since they tend to produce lots of seeds and you can stagger saving them along with your harvests. Processing tomato seeds is multi-stepped:

1. remove seeds from the fruit (again, make sure the fruit is fully ripe and thus seeds mature).
2. tomato seeds need to ferment a bit as the first step of processing - I leave them in small jars (with loose lids) on the counter for a couple days - keep a close eye on them though, they can mold really quickly (especially if you live someplace humid).
3. the fermentation process helps the seeds separate from the gelatinous material surrounding them (which actually helps to inhibit germination) but they will still need a hand to completely separate. I use a food processor, along with a bit of water - a couple quick pulses helps to separate the seeds. Those seeds that are viable will sink to the bottom, decant those floating along with other bits-n-pieces.
4. remove seeds from the processor and rinse over a strainer - flip them onto a paper towel, coffee filter or screens to dry.
5. store under cool, dry conditions.





LETTUCE!

I'm really taken by how much lettuce plants change across their lifespan.

Once the lettuce bolts (here this happens around mid-June, along with the radishes) they grow tall stalks filled with tiny flowers that eventually 'feather' and turn into a pappus - to be taken by the wind like dandelions.

Once this feather-like stage begins, lettuce seeds are ready to start saving. I find it easiest to cut the whole stem, and put them upside down in paper bags until I'm ready to process. Each flower can produce 25-30 seeds so you can get a lot from one plant.



Lettuce is an ideal food to grow and consider the wider reaching impacts of food supply chains as it is a great indicator crop of many of the inherent issues within the system itself (consider the hundreds of acres of lettuce plowed under at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic; or the intense flooding in Salinas Valley California this winter, from where Canada imports the majority of its lettuce; or the numerous reports of the rapidly increasing price of lettuce over the past three years). With a growing season that has been altered greatly by our warming spring and summers, lettuce tends to go to seed quite quickly these days. I have been growing my lettuce indoors to help increase the time I have with fresh green leaves, and move them outside in the spring to go to seed.





BIENNIAL VEGETABLES:

These plants don't flower (and thus seed) until their second year. We tend to grow them annually, eating the roots and greens produced during the first season before the reproduction stage begins.

Beets, chard, carrots and parsnip are all biennial and require vernalization before they shift into their reproductive stages - that is, they require a cold spell. This past year I had a surprise parsnip come back its 2nd year and produce seed. It was a forgotten plant that survived our winter (which are less cold year by year). The parsnip grew to well over 4 feet tall and produced what seems like thousands of seeds. I've left a few carrots to overwinter this year with hopes to be able to save carrot seeds this coming fall.

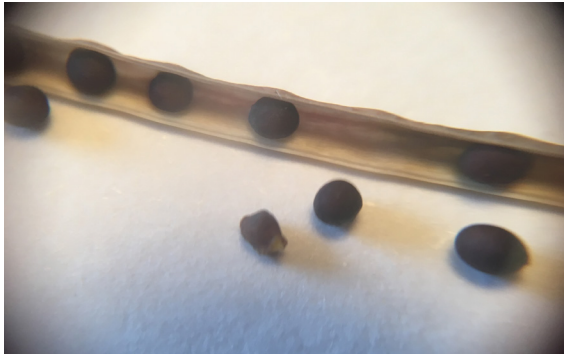


*left to right: parsnip plants
growing seed in year 2;
parsnip seeds dried and
ready to save*

RADISH seed pods grow on tall stalks after the plants have bolted and flowered. I usually plant radish in May, stop harvesting and let some go to seed in mid-June, and harvest the seeds around mid-September. It takes a while for them to produce mature seeds, so they can take up a lot of room in the garden that could otherwise go to other veggies.

The pods are ready when they're dry and about to crack (naturally they'd do just that and self-seed for another crop) - cut them from the stem of the plant and store in a paper bag to further dry until you're ready to process.

Some leafy greens like **ARUGULA** and **MUSTARD** produce seeds in a similar way: plants flower and then grow seed pods along tall stems. You can harvest in the same way as radishes.



*left: mustard seeds
mature in pods
similar to radish (on
right)*



SEED LIFE SPAN varies and depends on storage conditions. Seeds that are kept in air-tight containers in a cool, dry place will last longer than those in more humid conditions. Here is some information on minimum seed life (depending on storage conditions):

One Year: Parsley

Two Years: Corn, Onions, Leeks

One to Three Years: Okra

Three Years: Peppers

Three to Four Years: Beans, Carrot, Peas, Pumpkin

Four to Six Years: Eggplant

Five Years: Swiss Chard, Beets, Cucumbers, Watermelon

Six years: Arugula, Mustard, Radish, Squash, Collard, Tomatillo,
Lettuce, Spinach

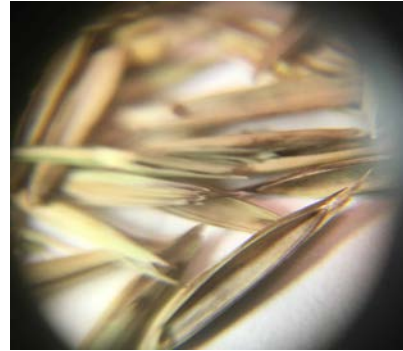
Five to Ten Years: Tomatoes

Several years: Cauliflower, Shallots

Remember these are just minimums – another good reason to start seedlings indoors is to test your seeds before planting!



top: Black Eyed Susan; bottom: chive.



clockwise from top left: pot marigold (calendula); oat grass; marigolds; poppies.



clockwise from top left: lettuce, nasturtium, oat grass, and wildflower seeds.