

TINY MIRACLES: PLANTS GROWN FROM COLLECTED SEEDS

By Vera Strader

Seeds are nature's little wonders, for an entire plant is stored within their tiny walls. Many seeds are easy to start—just add soil, sunshine, and water, and miracles happen.

You can buy seeds of course, but gathering your own is especially satisfying, economical, and a gateway to growing unusual plants. Where there is or was a blossom, there are potentially seeds to collect. Here are some tips, if you want to try your hand at collecting seeds:

TIMING IS ESSENTIAL. Immature seeds won't sprout. How do you tell if seeds are ready? Look for seeds from mature garden produce like melon and squash. Other seeds or their seedpods turn a darker color; seedpods may begin to break open. Some plants, like the spider flower, have mature seeds while still producing flowers.

Time your collecting just before birds and the elements disperse the seeds. Many seedpods burst open "shooting" their contents a good distance. Put your hand around a California poppy or lupine seedpod, and if it is ready, it will burst open in your hand. Milkweed seedpods split, revealing fluffy "umbrellas" that scatter their seeds in the breeze.

Avoid seeds from hybrid plants as hybrids are produced from two different plants of a similar species. Hybrids may not produce seeds at all, or seeds may revert back to one of the original plants. This sometimes happens in the garden, usually with the help of bees. Plants, like squash, melons and tomatoes can cross-pollinate with a similar, though different, plant and produce unexpected offspring.

STORING SEEDS. Remember to record the name of the plant your seeds came from, the date, and where you got them. Some of my favorite plants were started with seeds from long-lost but unforgotten friends.

Next, dry your seeds if they are to be saved for any time. Seeds may look dry, but chances are they contain enough moisture to spoil during storage. Just putting them in an open dish or light paper envelope for a few days may do the job. If in doubt, spread them out on a dry paper towel and let them air dry. Depending on the humidity, it should take from a few days to a couple of weeks to finish. If you put some in a sealed glass jar and condensation appears in the jar, they need further drying.

Next, remove the excess chaff (the pods or dry flower parts that surround the seeds). Some seedpods require rubbing or even threshing between two boards. For others, separate or winnow by blowing away the lighter chaff or put in a clear bag and shake until the heavier seeds fall to the bottom.

Once the seeds are dry and cleaned of excess chaff, they are ready for storage. Paper envelopes work if stored in low humidity. Otherwise opt for glass jars with tight fitting lids or sealed plastic bags. Store in a cool, dark closet.

GETTING SEEDS STARTED. Before trying to entice your seeds to grow, learn how best to do so. Annuals tend to be easier than perennials and fresh seeds more reliable than older ones. Nonetheless, I have squash seeds from my garden of seven years ago that continue to germinate just fine.

Other seeds require special attention. Buckeye and oak seeds must be especially fresh and undried. Columbine seeds need to be planted in soil and then chilled or refrigerated (stratified) for several weeks. Yet others may require heat, soaking, or nicking of the surface (scarification). The *Sunset Western Garden Book* offers tips for starting many easier seeds; specialty books or knowledgeable gardeners can help with trickier ones. The California Native Plant Society also offers seed-growing resources at their local meetings and plant sales.

A WORD TO THE WISE. Seed collecting need not be limited to your own yard. First get permission from other gardeners or landowners. Never take more than five percent of the seeds available so there will be plenty to reproduce, and never collect seeds of protected or endangered plants.

And beware: Seed collecting can be habit forming. I've got quite a stash of seeds in my closet; I'll definitely get to them--next year...

If you have any questions, call Master Gardeners at their hotline of 533-5912. See you in the garden.

Vera Strader is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County who is always on the watch for seeds of unusual plants for her Sonora yard.

UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.