



Saving Seeds for Next Year's Garden

by Rose Certini, UC Master Gardener

As days shorten and temperatures cool ever so slightly, a gardener's attention turns from harvesting backyard bounty to saving seed to start next year's crop.

It's easy to dry these little pent-up bundles of potential energy and poke them in the ground in spring. The hard part comes early on - as in now - in studying which plants stayed pure enough to save from, and which got "crossed" during the summer, rendering them unreliable sources of genetic material.

Keeping a seed line unmarred can be tricky, but don't lose sleep over it - if things get mixed up you can always go to the nearest nursery or online to buy another packet.

Seeds come from the store in two styles: hybrid and open-pollinated, with the latter sometimes further defined as "heirloom," meaning the seed line has been around 50 or 60 years.

Hybrids are known for producing fruits of uniform size, heavy crops and good disease-resistance, but unfortunately hybrid seed doesn't breed true to type, so the seed you save today planted and grown to maturity won't produce fruit that looks or tastes like the parent. Open-pollinated plants on the other hand reliably pass along the exact same traits from one season to the next.

So how do you know what you've got? If you still have it, go back to the seed packet and look for the words "heirloom" or "hybrid" next to the varietal name. Some seed companies print "F1," after the name, which also means hybrid. If the envelope doesn't specify, go online to see how other seed companies regard your seed variety.



Sliced vegetables show the seeds drying in the tomato fruit.



Heirloom tomatoes on the vine.

The next things to know are how the plants in question spread their pollen: by insect, wind, or by self (internally prior to blossom).

Self-pollinators such as beans, peas and most modern tomatoes are easy to save seeds from: they pollinate themselves early while the bloom is still closed, so crossing is not an issue. You can grow plants of differing variety next to each other and still collect the seed. Potato-leafed tomatoes, eggplant, okra and peppers tend toward self-pollination but may also allow insect activity, so isolate varieties with as much space as you can spare.

Cucumbers, melons and squash are a different matter. Bees and other bugs can move pollen up to a quarter-mile, while corn pollen whisked along by the wind can pollinate corn a half-mile or more down the road. To get around this limitation, stagger planting dates by a month and use varieties known to be early or late, so the first puts on fruit before the second gets to the blossoming stage. For example early white bush scallop squash can be easily followed by trombetta squash.

Life would be easy growing only one variety each of cucumber, melon, squash or corn, but wouldn't that be boring – lacking that special spark of horticultural or culinary challenge. Plus, it's not as if you have to save *every* type of seed *every* season – most keep good in storage anywhere from two to 10 years, depending on plant type and variety.

Select the healthiest-looking fruit to be left on the stalk or vine to mature to an over-ripe stage before collecting and drying seed. Take from as many individual plants as possible to guard against inbreeding. Label, and then store these treasures in a cool, dark, dry place - a sealed glass jar in the refrigerator or cellar works well.

For the nitty-gritty on how to save from most species of edible plants, check out *Seed to Seed*, by Suzanne Ashworth, *New Seed Starters Handbook*, by Nancy Bubel, and web sites www.howtosaveseeds.com, <http://fedcoseeds.com>, www.seedsavers.org, and www.motherearthnews.com.

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