

Here's How To Collect Seeds For Next Year From Your Favorite Garden Plants

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Aug. 23, 2019

Q: Many of the flowers in my yard are starting to dry up and form seeds. Can I collect these and save them to plant next year?

A: Yes, you can collect and save many of the seed that grow in your yard and garden. Saving seeds from plants you have grown can be very satisfying and, if you are an organic gardener, an easy source of organic seed. Some seeds are relatively easy to save while others may take some work. Easy to save seeds include poppy, daylily, columbine, calendula, dill, beans, and other legumes.



Poppy seeds. (Photo: Amber Sandhu/Record Searchlight)

To save seeds from flowering plants, check the flowers often until you notice flower fading and stem starting to harden. A good indication that the seed pod is drying out is that it will start to fade to light green or gray. This indicates that the seed pods are starting to dry and at this time you will want to determine if the seed pod is dehiscent or indehiscent. This is important as dehiscent seed pods will burst open as they dry, scattering seeds far and wide, while indehiscent will remain closed. If the seed is one that will open as it dries (dehiscent) then you will want to place a paper bag around the seed pod as it starts to dry out. Once the flower head or seed pod has dried you will want to cut it from the plant with the bag still around it and then carefully remove the pod or flower head while shaking the seeds out into the bag. You can then transfer the seeds from the bag to an envelope for easy labeling and storage.



The center, seed-forming portion of a sunflower ripens in Burlington. (Photo: Joel Banner Baird/Free Press)

Collecting seeds from fruits such as peppers or tomatoes takes a different process. For pepper, remove the seeds from a ripe pepper, dry them on a paper towel. Tomato seeds are a little more work: First remove seeds from the ripe tomato and then soak them in a glass of water for a couple of days until a scum develops on the top, and the seeds sink to the bottom. Drain off the water and scum and dry seeds on a fine-meshed screen.

Squash seeds can be harder to save. The squash must be fully mature before harvested for seed. This means that summer squash must be left on the vine until the outer shell hardens, then seeds are scrapped out and rinsed until clean before drying. The other issue with saving squash or pumpkin seeds is that squash tend to cross pollinate so the seed saved may not grow to be the same as the squash you grew this summer.

Remember, even heirloom plants may not yield seeds that are true to form. If different varieties are planted close together, their flowers may cross-pollinate. The resulting progeny may be a surprise. Keep wind-pollinated plants, such as corn, isolated from each other by at least 250 feet or more. Also keep in

mind that hybrid cultivars of plants may either have sterile seeds, or if they do germinate, the offspring will not mirror their parents' characteristics.

Once you have collected and dried your seeds they are ready to store, all seeds should be stored in a cool, dry, dark place in closed glass containers. Do not store them in plastic because of potential moisture damage. One to two tablespoons of dried milk powder wrapped in facial tissue can be enclosed with the seed, which acts as a desiccant, helping seed stay dry and last longer.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.