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SUMMARY

Gardeners should consider the source of seeds before saving them for next year's produce. The best bet is plants in your own garden grown from heirloom or open-pollinated seeds. For best results, know how to harvest, clean, dry, and store your seeds.

Seeds Are Worth Saving

by Arti Kirch, UC Master Gardener

Store-bought produce may not be suitable when saving seeds for your vegetable garden.

Q: I want to grow my own vegetables. Can I take seeds from produce I buy from the grocery store and plant them?

A: You can save seeds from the produce you buy, but you may not get the results you want.

Saving Grocery Produce Seeds:

First, many of the delicious vegetables sold in stores and farmer's markets are the result of hybridization. Hybrids, which are the offspring of different parent varieties, do not "breed true". What that means is the hybrid seed will not produce the same result as the vegetable you enjoyed. Second, much of our produce is only appealing – and shipped – to us before the seeds themselves have had enough time to mature.

An Ancient Practice:

Saving seeds to plant for a new crop is an ancient but simple and enjoyable process. In fact, it was routinely practiced until the 19th century when seed companies started to multiply. Seed saving is especially useful if the

seeds for the item you want are hard to find. Additionally, it enables you to re-plant varieties that are well-suited to your garden's particular conditions.

Saving Garden Produce Seeds:

Saving seeds from your own garden will start with vegetables grown from seeds identified as "open pollinated" or "heirloom". Determining when to harvest for seed saving is generally based on whether the seed is classified as wet or dry. Tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, and squash are examples of wet seeds. Wet seeds should be collected when the vegetable is slightly overripe. Beans, corn, and peas are dry seed varieties. They should be harvested several weeks after the vegetable's prime, but before they rot. After harvesting, there are three steps: cleaning, drying, and storing.

Processing Your Seeds:

To clean wet seeds, separate them from the fleshy vegetable, rinse until they are clean, and spread them out to dry thoroughly. Dry them on a screen or a pan as the dried seed can be difficult to



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separate from paper towel or newspaper. Be aware that some wet seeds, such as tomatoes, need another step before rinsing and drying. Soak them in their own juice and pulp for about a week until a white mold appears – be sure to stir the mixture daily. This mimics a natural process that lets beneficial micro-organisms develop to destroy seed-borne diseases. When the seeds are completely dry, store them in a cool, dry area in glass jars or cans with firmly-fitted lids. Don't use plastic containers.

Dry seeds are cleaned by removing them from their surrounding pods and membranes, also known as “chaff”. One method to eliminate the chaff is to first rub the shelled and dried seeds against something mildly abrasive, such as a screen. Then, put the seeds into a jar; pour the seeds into another jar outside in the wind, or in front of a variable speed fan, and allow the air to carry the chaff away. After cleaning, store the seeds in cloth bags or paper envelopes.



Photo by Jack Kelly Clark, courtesy University of California Statewide IPM Program