

The GreenLife Project

Free Guide

Simple Seed Saving for Beginners

An Easy-to-Follow Guide to Growing
Your Favorite Plants While Preserving
Heirloom Heritage Plants



FREE DOWNLOAD

Save, dry, store & label seeds from your garden — season after season. Part of the GreenLife Project Resource Library.

A NOTE ON THIS GUIDE

Simple Seed Saving for Beginners

Every seed you save is an act of hope — a quiet insistence that the flavors, the stories, and the living heritage of our gardens belong to all of us.

This guide is written for the complete beginner. No special equipment, no horticultural degree, no large garden required. Seed saving is one of the oldest human skills — practiced for more than ten thousand years before there were seed catalogs, garden centers, or F1 hybrids engineered for shelf life. What you are learning here is not new. It is ancient and essential.

Throughout this guide, green citation boxes like the one below indicate sources for specific recommendations and data, so you can explore further if you wish.

Example: Ashworth, Suzanne. Seed to Seed: Seed Saving and Growing Techniques for Vegetable Gardeners. Seed Savers Exchange, 2002. The foundational reference for home seed savers in North America.

A full reference list appears at the back of this guide. We are educators and gardeners, committed to keeping the knowledge of seed saving alive and freely shared.

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INTRODUCTION

Why Save Seeds?

Kneel down in your garden and hold a dry bean in your palm. That bean contains everything — the genetic memory of every plant that came before it, the particular adaptation to your soil and your climate that built up over seasons, the flavor that no catalog variety can quite replicate. It also contains next year's garden, if you let it.

Human beings have been saving seeds for more than ten thousand years. Before there were seed companies, before hybridization and patents and intellectual property law, there were gardeners doing exactly what you are about to learn: selecting the best, drying carefully, storing safely, sharing generously.

"A seed saved is a story kept. Every heirloom variety carries the memory of someone who thought it worth passing on."

The modern seed industry is remarkable in many ways — it has given us disease resistance, uniform ripening, high yields. But it has also narrowed the gene pool dramatically. Thousands of heirloom varieties that were grown widely a century ago are now held by only a handful of seed libraries and dedicated gardeners. When a variety is lost, it is lost permanently.

Seed saving is, at its core, an act of stewardship. You are not just growing food. You are maintaining a living library.

Heirloom vs. Hybrid: What You Need to Know First

THE MOST IMPORTANT DISTINCTION IN SEED SAVING

Open-pollinated / Heirloom seeds breed true — the plants they produce will look and taste like their parents. These are the seeds worth saving.

Hybrid seeds (marked F1) are crosses between two varieties, engineered for specific traits. You can save hybrid seeds, but the next generation will be genetically unpredictable — reverting toward one parent or the other.

Always check your seed packet before deciding to save. Open-pollinated and heirloom varieties are clearly labeled at most seed companies. Hybrid seeds are always marked F1.

Ashworth, Suzanne. *Seed to Seed: Seed Saving and Growing Techniques for Vegetable Gardeners*. Seed Savers Exchange, 2002. *The definitive reference on open-pollinated vs. hybrid seed genetics and saving techniques.*

CHAPTER ONE

The Best Plants to Start With

Some seeds are forgiving and easy for beginners. Start here, build confidence, and expand your practice each season.

The easiest seeds to save are those from self-pollinating plants — plants that fertilize themselves before insects or wind can carry pollen from another variety. This means you can grow different varieties side by side without worrying about cross-pollination, and the seeds you save will reliably produce plants identical to the parent.

BEST PLANTS FOR FIRST-TIME SEED SAVERS

Tomatoes <i>Self-pollinating · Very easy</i>	Beans <i>Self-pollinating · Perfect start</i>	Peas <i>Self-pollinating · Very easy</i>
Lettuce <i>Self-pollinating · Prolific</i>	Peppers <i>Mostly self-pollinating</i>	Squash <i>Cross-pollinates · Intermediate</i>
Echinacea <i>Medicinal · Easy to save</i>	Sunflowers <i>Cross-pollinates · Rewarding</i>	Calendula <i>Medicinal & easy · Prolific</i>

Choosing Your Best Seeds

The most important principle in seed saving is *selection*. You are not just saving seeds — you are making a deliberate choice about what thrives in your garden next year. Always save from your strongest, healthiest, most flavorful plants. Never save from the first plant to bolt, the one that showed disease, or the smallest fruit.

SELECTING FOR SAVING — WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- ▶ Choose plants that were vigorous, healthy, and productive all season long
- ▶ Select for the qualities you love most — flavor, size, color, earliness

- ▶ Let fruit fully ripen — seed-saving ripeness is beyond eating ripeness
- ▶ Never save from plants that showed disease or significant pest pressure
- ▶ Save from multiple plants of the same variety to maintain genetic diversity
- ▶ Tag your chosen plants early in the season so you remember not to harvest them

Deppe, Carol. *Breed Your Own Vegetable Varieties*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2000. *Selection principles and saving from multiple parent plants for genetic diversity*.

CHAPTER TWO

Harvest, Clean & Dry

The process is simple and satisfying. Most seeds need three things: full ripeness, complete dryness, and storage away from light and moisture.

1

Let it fully ripen

Seed-saving ripeness is beyond eating ripeness. Tomatoes should be soft and deep-colored. Beans should be papery and rattling in the pod. Lettuce should have gone fully to flower. Patience here is everything.

2

Harvest the seeds

Cut open fruit and scoop or shake seeds free. For wet seeds (tomatoes, squash), the fermentation method removes the gel coating. For dry seeds (beans, flowers), simply shell or thresh directly onto a clean surface.

3

Ferment if needed

Tomato and cucumber seeds benefit from 2–3 days of fermentation in a jar of water. Good seeds sink; empty ones float. Drain, rinse thoroughly, and spread to dry. Fermentation also kills some seed-borne diseases.

4

Wash & rinse

Rinse seeds in a fine-mesh strainer under cool running water. Remove any remaining pulp, gel, or chaff. Clean seeds dry more evenly and store more reliably than unwashed ones.

5

Dry completely

Spread in a single layer on a ceramic plate, glass surface, or parchment paper — never on paper towels, which cause seeds to stick. Dry at room temperature for 1–3 weeks, out of direct sun.

6

Test for dryness

Bend a seed — if it snaps cleanly, it is dry. If it bends, give it more time. Or place seeds in a sealed jar for 24 hours: any condensation means more drying is needed before storage.

The Fermentation Method — For Tomatoes & Cucumbers

Scoop seeds and surrounding gel into a jar. Add an equal amount of water. Set in a warm spot (not direct sun) for 2–3 days, stirring once daily. A layer of mold will form — this is normal and beneficial. After fermentation, add more water, stir vigorously, and let settle. Good seeds sink. Pour off the mold, water, and floating seeds. Rinse the good seeds thoroughly and spread immediately to dry.

*"The seed that is not fully dry is the seed that will not survive winter.
Patience in drying is the most important habit a seed saver can build."*

Ashworth, Suzanne. *Seed to Seed* (Seed Savers Exchange, 2002). Fermentation method for tomatoes and cucumbers; drying and storage protocols.

CHAPTER THREE

Storage & Labeling

A seed perfectly saved can outlast the gardener who saved it. The enemies are simple: moisture, heat, and light. Defeat all three and your seeds will be alive and waiting for years.

The Three Rules of Seed Storage

Cool. Seeds stay dormant and viable longest at cool, stable temperatures. A cool pantry, basement, or refrigerator (in a sealed container) works beautifully. Avoid anywhere with temperature fluctuations.

Dark. Light triggers metabolic processes that shorten seed life. Store in opaque envelopes inside a closed tin, box, or drawer — or in a sealed jar in a dark cupboard.

Dry. Moisture is the greatest enemy. Seeds must be bone dry before storage, and containers must be airtight. A small silica gel packet in your storage tin absorbs residual moisture. Replace annually.

Many heirloom seeds remain viable for 5–10 years when stored properly. A jar of seeds in a cool, dark, dry place will outlast almost any purchased packet.

Seed Viability at a Glance

CROP	TYPICAL VIABILITY	NOTES
Tomatoes	4–7 years	One of the longest-lived; stores beautifully
Beans & Peas	3–5 years	Reliable; easy to store in paper envelopes
Squash & Pumpkin	4–6 years	Dry thoroughly — they hold moisture
Peppers	2–4 years	Dry completely; germination declines quickly
Lettuce	1–3 years	Short-lived; save fresh each year if possible
Sunflowers	2–4 years	Watch for moisture; store in paper
Calendula	3–5 years	Prolific producer; easy to save large amounts
Echinacea	2–3 years	Save when seed heads are fully dry on the plant

Labeling — Never Skip This Step

Every packet needs four things: the variety name, the plant species, where it came from, and the year saved. Six months from now you will be grateful for every detail you recorded. Use a permanent marker and label before you seal the packet — never after.

WHAT TO WRITE ON EVERY PACKET

Variety name — e.g. "Brandywine Tomato" or "Dragon Tongue Bean"

Year saved — essential for tracking viability over time

Source — your garden, a neighbor's, a seed library, a friend

Notes — "best flavor," "earliest producer," "grew beautifully in shade"

CHAPTER FOUR

Troubleshooting

SEEDS WON'T GERMINATE

They may not have been fully ripe when harvested, or were not dried completely. Always let fruit over-ripen for seed saving, and test dryness before storage.

MOLD IN STORAGE

Seeds were not dry enough before sealing. Spread immediately to dry further. Add a fresh silica gel packet. Mold on the outside of a seed doesn't always mean it's dead — test germinate to check.

PLANTS DON'T LOOK LIKE THE PARENT

The variety likely cross-pollinated. This is normal and not always bad. For true-to-type saving, isolate varieties or grow only one variety per species per season.

SEEDS STUCK TO PAPER TOWEL

Always dry on glass, ceramic, or parchment. Seeds dried on paper towels bond to the fibers as they dry and are nearly impossible to remove without damage.

LOW GERMINATION RATE

Do a test germination before planting season: place 10 seeds on a damp paper towel, fold, and keep warm. Count how many sprout — that percentage tells you how many extra to plant.

DON'T KNOW THE VARIETY NAME

Save it anyway. Call it "Grandma's Red Bean" or "Market Tomato 2026." The name matters less than the seed. Document what you can and keep growing it.

A Final Reassurance

Seed saving is more forgiving than most beginner guides suggest. Seeds want to survive. Your job is simply to help them along — keep them dry, keep them cool, keep them dark, and label them carefully. The rest will take care of itself.

Make mistakes. Notice what happens. Adjust. This is how every seed saver learns, and it is how every heirloom variety has survived to reach your hands.

"Make mistakes. Notice what happens. Adjust. This is how every seed saver learns — and how every heirloom has survived to reach your hands."

CHAPTER FIVE

Protecting Medicinal Seeds & United Plant Savers

Not all seeds that need saving are in your vegetable garden. Some of the most important seeds to save are those of native medicinal plants — plants that have healed human communities for thousands of years and are now disappearing from the wild due to habitat loss and overharvesting.



We are proud members of United Plant Savers (UpS)

Founded in 1994 by Rosemary Gladstar — widely known as the Godmother of American Herbalism — United Plant Savers works to protect native North American medicinal plants from overharvesting and habitat loss. UpS maintains an At-Risk Species List, stewards a 370-acre botanical sanctuary in Rutland, Ohio, and supports a national network of private botanical sanctuaries. Learn more and become a member at unitedplantsavers.org.

At-Risk Medicinal Plants Worth Growing & Saving

Echinacea

Echinacea spp.

Goldenseal

Hydrastis canadensis

Black Cohosh

Actaea racemosa

Bloodroot

Sanguinaria canadensis

Wild Ginger

Asarum canadense

Calendula

Easy · Prolific

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- ▶ Grow at-risk medicinal plants in your garden — even one plant counts
- ▶ Save their seeds and share them with your community
- ▶ Choose cultivated over wildcrafted herbs when buying supplements
- ▶ Register your property as a Botanical Sanctuary with UpS
- ▶ Become a member at unitedplantsavers.org

United Plant Savers. unitedplantsavers.org. At-Risk Species List; Botanical Sanctuary Network; membership information.
Founded 1994 by Rosemary Gladstar.

APPENDIX A

Complete Seed Viability Chart

Use this chart as a guide when deciding which seeds to save fresh each year and which can be kept from prior seasons. Viability declines gradually — a 4-year-old tomato seed may germinate, but at a lower rate. Always do a germination test on older seeds before committing an entire bed.

CROP	VIABILITY	STORAGE TIP	SAVING DIFFICULTY
Tomatoes	4–7 years	Ferment before drying; store airtight	Easy
Beans	3–5 years	Let dry on the vine; paper envelopes	Very Easy
Peas	3–5 years	Let dry on the vine completely	Very Easy
Lettuce	1–3 years	Let bolt; shake heads into a paper bag	Easy
Peppers	2–4 years	Dry at room temp 2–3 weeks minimum	Easy
Squash	4–6 years	Wash seeds well; dry thoroughly	Intermediate
Cucumbers	5–7 years	Ferment as for tomatoes	Easy
Corn	2–3 years	Let dry on cob; isolate varieties carefully	Intermediate
Sunflowers	2–4 years	Let heads dry on plant; watch for birds	Easy
Calendula	3–5 years	Collect when seed heads are dry and brown	Very Easy
Echinacea	2–3 years	Let seed heads dry on plant; collect late fall	Easy
Basil	5–8 years	Let flower heads dry fully before collecting	Easy
Parsley	1–2 years	Biennial — save in year two after it flowers	Intermediate
Carrots	3–4 years	Biennial; needs two seasons; isolate carefully	Advanced
Onions	1–2 years	Very short-lived; save fresh every year	Intermediate

Ashworth, Suzanne. *Seed to Seed* (Seed Savers Exchange, 2002). Viability data for all vegetable crops. Gladstar, Rosemary. *Medicinal Herbs* (Storey Publishing, 2012). Medicinal plant seed saving.

APPENDIX B

Month-by-Month Seed Saving Calendar

Seed saving is a rhythm woven through the gardening year. This calendar keeps the practice alive season by season. Tick off tasks as you complete them.

JANUARY – FEBRUARY

- ☐ Order open-pollinated and heirloom seeds for the season
- ☐ Test germination on older stored seeds
- ☐ Review and reorganize seed storage; discard expired seeds
- ☐ Plan which varieties you will save from this year
- ☐ Restock silica gel packets for storage tins

MAY – JUNE

- ☐ Mark seed-saving plants with stakes or ribbon — do not harvest
- ☐ Observe plants for vigor, health, and the traits you want to keep
- ☐ Begin saving early peas and beans as pods dry
- ☐ Let lettuce bolt if saving lettuce seed

SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER

- ☐ Harvest winter squash seeds — wash and dry thoroughly
- ☐ Collect bean and pea seeds left to dry on the vine
- ☐ Final dryness check on all seeds before sealing for storage
- ☐ Pack seeds into labeled envelopes and store in cool, dark tins
- ☐ Note exceptional plants in your seed journal for next year

MARCH – APRIL

- ☐ Start seeds indoors — note which varieties are for saving
- ☐ Tag plants designated for seed saving as transplants go in
- ☐ Plant only one variety per species if saving cross-pollinators
- ☐ Prepare envelopes and labels for the coming season

JULY – AUGUST

- ☐ Harvest tomatoes for seed — ferment, rinse, and spread to dry
- ☐ Collect pepper seeds as fruits fully ripen to red or orange
- ☐ Harvest calendula and echinacea seed heads as they dry
- ☐ Collect sunflower heads when backs turn yellow-brown
- ☐ Label everything immediately — never trust your memory

NOVEMBER – DECEMBER

- ☐ Complete final seed processing and storage
- ☐ Share surplus seeds with neighbors and seed libraries
- ☐ Record the season in your seed journal
- ☐ Rest. The seeds are resting too. Spring is coming.

APPENDIX C

Further Reading

The following books and resources are referenced in this guide and represent the best available practical guidance for home seed savers.

- **Seed to Seed** — Suzanne Ashworth (Seed Savers Exchange, 2002). The definitive guide to saving seeds from over 160 vegetables. Every seed saver should own this book.
- **The Organic Seed Grower** — John Navazio (Chelsea Green, 2012). More technical; excellent for those ready to go deeper into isolation distances and population sizes.
- **Breed Your Own Vegetable Varieties** — Carol Deppe (Chelsea Green, 2000). For the curious mind — covers selection, crossing, and developing your own varieties.
- **Medicinal Herbs: A Beginner's Guide** — Rosemary Gladstar (Storey Publishing, 2012). Growing and saving medicinal plants; written by the founder of United Plant Savers.
- **The Heirloom Life Gardener** — Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (Hyperion, 2011). Inspirational and practical; one of America's great heirloom seed families shares their knowledge.

ORGANIZATIONS WORTH KNOWING

- **Seed Savers Exchange** — seedsavers.org. America's largest heirloom seed library. Membership gives access to thousands of varieties.
- **United Plant Savers** — unitedplantsavers.org. Protecting at-risk native medicinal plants. We are proud members.
- **Native Seeds/SEARCH** — nativeseeds.org. Preserving the food plants of the American Southwest and Northwest Mexico.
- **Organic Seed Alliance** — seedalliance.org. Research, education, and advocacy for organic seed systems.

FROM THE GREENLIFE PROJECT

Visit our Resources page for additional free guides, community recommendations, and links to our growing seed-saving community.

thegreenlifeproject.com/resources

YOUR SEED JOURNAL

Record Your Harvest

Track every seed saved — the variety, when and where you saved it, and what you noticed about the plant it came from. The gardener who keeps records grows in wisdom as quickly as her garden grows in abundance.

A Final Word

Seeds are not a commodity. They are a covenant — between this generation and the next, between the gardener and the land, between what we have received and what we choose to pass on. Save generously. Share freely. Grow with joy.