

SAVE THE SEASON

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO SAVING SEEDS

Grow it once. Learn from it. Grow it again.

Start with the crops that make seed saving easy, learn what can cross, dry and store seed correctly, and slowly build a collection adapted to the garden you actually grow.

THE HARVEST DOES NOT HAVE TO END AT DINNER.

01 Start with the easy ones.

The best first seed crop is one that makes the rules simple enough to learn.

Seed saving gets complicated only when you try to save everything at once. Begin with crops that are mostly self-pollinating or easy to keep true, then add more complicated species as your confidence grows.

- Beans and peas: let pods dry fully on the plant when weather allows.
- Lettuce: allow a healthy plant to bolt, flower, and mature seed heads.
- Tomatoes: save seed from ripe fruit and use a short fermentation process before drying.
- Peppers: save from fully mature fruit; take extra care with hot peppers and avoid touching eyes or skin after handling seed tissue.
- Many herbs and flowers: allow seed heads to mature and dry before collecting.

BEST BEGINNER RULE

Save seed from healthy plants you would actually want more of. You are choosing next year's parents, not just cleaning out this year's fruit.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

PICK ONE CROP THIS YEAR

Choose one easy crop - beans, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, peas, or a familiar flower. Learn its full seed cycle from flowering to storage before adding five more species.

02 Know what kind of seed you planted.

Open-pollinated and hybrid plants can both make seed, but they do not give you the same expectation.

Open-pollinated varieties can reproduce their recognizable traits when they are kept from unwanted cross-pollination. Heirlooms are open-pollinated varieties with a history of being passed down. Hybrid seed is produced by crossing selected parent lines; seed saved from the hybrid may grow, but the next generation can vary widely.

- Open-pollinated does not mean immune to crossing. Pollination biology still matters.
- Heirloom is a history label, not a guarantee that every plant will be genetically identical.
- Hybrid plants are not sterile by definition. Their saved seed simply may not reproduce the original variety faithfully.
- If your only goal is experimentation, saving hybrid seed can still be interesting. Label it honestly.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

READ THE PACKET BEFORE HARVEST

Find the original packet or variety description and mark it OPEN-POLLINATED, HEIRLOOM, or HYBRID. If you cannot identify the variety, save it as an experiment rather than assuming it will come true.

03 Cross-pollination is crop-specific.

A tomato does not follow the same rules as a squash.

Some vegetables mostly pollinate themselves. Others depend heavily on insects or wind and can cross readily with compatible plants nearby. The important word is compatible: plants do not cross simply because they are both called squash, peppers, or brassicas.

- Tomatoes are largely self-pollinating, though crossing can still happen.
- Beans and peas are generally beginner-friendly because self-pollination is common.
- Peppers can cross between compatible varieties, especially where pollinating insects move between flowers.
- Squash and pumpkins can cross with compatible varieties of the same species; different squash species do not all cross with one another.
- Brassicas can be complicated because multiple vegetables may belong to the same species and can cross.
- Corn is wind-pollinated and crosses readily, which makes small-scale pure seed saving harder.

DO NOT MEMORIZE RANDOM DISTANCES

Recommended isolation depends on crop, population size, landscape, pollinators, and how genetically pure you need the seed to be. Use a crop-specific seed-saving reference or extension resource when purity matters.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

WRITE THE SPECIES, NOT JUST THE NICKNAME

When you save a complicated crop such as squash or brassicas, write down the botanical species from the packet or catalog. That tells you far more about crossing risk than the common name.

04 Dry-seeded crops are the easiest.

If the seed matures in a dry pod or head, the plant does much of the processing for you.

Beans, peas, lettuce, many herbs, and many flowers are dry-seeded crops. The goal is to let the seed mature fully before collecting it, then finish drying it in a protected place.

- Leave pods or seed heads on the plant until they are dry or nearly dry when weather permits.
- If prolonged rain threatens mature seed, harvest the stalk or pod and finish drying indoors with airflow.
- Thresh or shell the seed only after it is mature.
- Remove obvious chaff, damaged seed, and insect debris before storage.
- Do not seal seed away while it still feels cool, soft, or damp.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

USE A PAPER BAG AS A FINISH LINE

Place nearly dry seed heads loosely in a labeled paper bag and keep them somewhere dry with airflow. The bag catches falling seed without trapping the moisture the way a sealed plastic bag can.

05 Wet-seeded crops need cleaning.

Tomatoes and some other fleshy fruits hold seed inside wet tissue.

For tomatoes, fermentation helps separate viable seed from the gelatinous coating surrounding it. This is a short, controlled process followed by rinsing and very thorough drying.

- Scoop seed and surrounding gel from fully ripe tomatoes into a small labeled container.
- Add a small amount of water if needed and leave the mixture loosely covered at room temperature for a short fermentation - commonly a few days.
- Once the gel breaks down, add water, stir, and pour off floating debris while retaining the heavier seed.
- Rinse the cleaned seed thoroughly.
- Spread seed in a thin layer on a non-porous surface, coffee filter, or other material it can be removed from easily, and dry completely before storage.

LABEL FIRST

A jar of tomato pulp looks remarkably anonymous two days later. Label the container before the seed goes in.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

PROCESS ONE TOMATO VARIETY AT A TIME

Finish cleaning, rinsing, and labeling one variety before opening the next fruit. Seed-saving mistakes are often paperwork mistakes disguised as gardening mistakes.

06 Maturity matters more than size.

Seed is not always ready when the crop is ready to eat.

Some crops are harvested for food before their seed has fully matured. Cucumbers, summer squash, lettuce, radishes, carrots, and many other vegetables need extra time beyond the eating stage if the goal is viable seed.

- Seed-saving cucumbers become far more mature than the crisp fruit you would normally eat.
- Summer squash used for seed is left to become fully mature and hard.
- Lettuce needs to bolt and flower, long after the leaves have become bitter.
- Radish pods form after flowering instead of at the usual root harvest.
- Carrots and many other biennials generally flower in their second growing season after experiencing cold.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

MARK THE PLANT YOU ARE NOT EATING

Tie a piece of flagging tape or a label to the plant or fruit chosen for seed. Otherwise someone will eventually harvest your carefully selected seed crop for lunch.

07 Select, do not just collect.

The plants you save from become part of the next generation.

Seed saving is a form of selection. If you repeatedly save from plants that perform well in your garden, you may gradually favor traits that fit your conditions. But meaningful selection works best when you save from enough healthy plants to avoid narrowing the genetic base too aggressively.

- Choose plants with the flavor, vigor, timing, form, or resilience you value.
- Do not automatically save from the first plant to bolt if late bolting is important to you.
- Avoid saving seed from plants with serious disease symptoms when the disease may be seed-transmitted or when you cannot identify the problem.
- For crops that need a population to maintain diversity, save from multiple healthy plants rather than one superstar.
- Keep notes on why you selected each crop.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

WRITE ONE SELECTION SENTENCE

On the seed envelope, add a note such as 'saved from the latest-bolting lettuce plants' or 'best flavor in drought year.' That turns a packet of seed into a record of your garden.

08 Drying is where storage begins.

Seed that looks dry on the surface can still hold enough moisture to fail in storage.

Dry seed keeps best when moisture is low and temperature is stable. Exact storage life varies by species and conditions, but the universal rule is simple: do not package seed until it is thoroughly dry.

- Spread seed in a single layer rather than leaving it in thick piles.
- Dry in a shaded, protected place with good airflow.
- Avoid high heat that can damage seed viability.
- Keep varieties separated and labeled through the entire drying process.
- If you use sealed containers for long-term storage, make sure the seed is fully dry before sealing.

DRY IS NOT THE SAME AS BAKED

The goal is moisture removal, not heat. A hot oven, radiator, or blazing dashboard can ruin seed.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

GIVE DRYING A DEDICATED TRAY

Use one tray, plate, screen, or coffee filter per variety and put the label directly on that drying station. Never trust yourself to remember which unlabeled pile is which.

09 Label like future-you is a stranger.

A good seed envelope answers the questions you will have six months from now.

At minimum, record the crop, variety, year, and where the seed came from. Add notes on selection, crossing risk, or unusual growing conditions when they matter.

- Crop: tomato
- Variety: Cherokee Purple
- Year saved: 2026
- Location: backyard east bed
- Source: original seed company or person, if known
- Notes: earliest ripe fruit; healthy plant; open-pollinated; other tomatoes nearby

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

USE A NAMING SYSTEM NOW

Before your collection grows, choose one format and stick to it: CROP - VARIETY - YEAR. Write the same information on the envelope and in a simple spreadsheet, notebook, or phone note.

10 Store cool, dark, dry, and organized.

The perfect seed collection is useless if you cannot find it or if moisture ruins it.

For home gardeners, simple storage often works well: fully dry seed in labeled paper envelopes or packets, organized inside a larger airtight container in a cool, dark location. A small desiccant packet can help control moisture inside a sealed storage box.

- Keep seed away from heat sources, humid sheds, and direct sunlight.
- Avoid frequent temperature swings.
- Group packets by crop family, planting season, or alphabetically - whatever you will actually maintain.
- Check older seed before planting season and replace or test questionable lots.
- Protect seed from rodents and insects.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

BUILD A ONE-BOX SEED LIBRARY

Start with one weather-resistant or airtight storage box containing labeled paper packets. Do not build a complicated filing system until your collection is large enough to need one.

11 Do a germination test when it matters.

You do not need to wonder whether older seed is still worth planting.

A basic home germination test gives you a rough estimate of how much seed is still viable. It is especially useful for older seed, seed stored under questionable conditions, or a variety you do not have enough of to waste.

- Count a known number of seeds - 10 is simple, more gives a better estimate.
- Place them on a moist paper towel or another appropriate germination medium.
- Keep them under suitable temperature conditions for that crop.
- Keep the material moist, not waterlogged.
- Count how many germinate within the crop's normal germination window.
- If only half germinate, sow more heavily or replace the seed lot when you can.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

TEST BEFORE THE RUSH

Run germination tests several weeks before you need to sow. Discovering that a favorite packet is nearly dead the night before seed starting is unnecessarily dramatic.

12 A beginner crop cheat sheet.

Start simple, then work your way into crops with more complicated pollination and life cycles.

CROP	LEVEL	WHAT TO KNOW
BEANS / PEAS	Easy	Let pods mature and dry; shell and finish drying.
TOMATOES	Easy	Save from ripe fruit; ferment, rinse, and dry.
LETTUCE	Easy	Allow bolting and flowering; collect dry seed heads.
PEPPERS	Moderate	Fully mature fruit; crossing between compatible peppers is possible.
CUCUMBERS	Moderate	Fruit must mature beyond eating stage; crossing is possible.
SQUASH	Moderate / advanced	Know the species; compatible varieties of the same species can cross.
BRASSICAS	Advanced	Species relationships, biennial habits, and crossing can complicate purity.
CORN	Advanced	Wind-pollinated and crosses readily; population size matters.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

EARN YOUR WAY INTO THE COMPLICATED CROPS

Save one easy crop successfully before worrying about perfect squash isolation or biennial seed production. Seed saving is a skill stack. Build it.

13 Common mistakes that ruin good seed.

Most seed-saving failures are timing, moisture, crossing, or labeling problems.

- Saving from immature fruit or pods.
- Sealing seed before it is fully dry.
- Assuming hybrid seed will reproduce the original variety exactly.
- Ignoring cross-pollination in crops where purity matters.
- Saving from only one plant when a crop benefits from a larger population.
- Mixing varieties during drying or cleaning.
- Using unlabeled envelopes because 'I will remember.'
- Saving seed from a plant with an unknown serious disease problem.
- Leaving stored seed where heat, humidity, mice, or insects can reach it.

PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

CREATE A SEED-SAVING STATION

Keep paper bags, envelopes, a permanent marker, small jars, screens or plates, and labels in one bin. The easier it is to label and dry seed correctly, the less likely you are to create a mystery pile.

SAVE ONE THING. LEARN THE WHOLE CYCLE.

YOUR FIRST SEED-SAVING SEASON:

- Choose one beginner-friendly crop.
- Confirm whether the variety is open-pollinated, heirloom, or hybrid.
- Learn how that crop pollinates and whether nearby varieties can cross.
- Mark the healthiest plants you want to save from.
- Let the seed mature fully - even if that means the crop goes past eating quality.
- Process it with the correct dry-seed or wet-seed method.
- Dry it thoroughly.
- Label crop, variety, year, source, and selection notes.
- Store it cool, dark, dry, and protected.
- Plant some next year and see what you learned.

A seed is the garden carrying a memory forward.