

Planning Your Garden for Seed Saving

Saving seed starts with planning. Understanding basic concepts when you are planning your garden will make seed saving much easier.

Know whether your parent plant is a hybrid or open-pollinated variety. Hybrids, which are created by crossing plants of two different varieties, generally do not produce offspring with the same traits as the parent plant. Seed saved from open-pollinated varieties, on the other hand, will produce plants identical to the parent. Heirloom seeds are open-pollinated varieties with a history of being handed down from generation to generation.

Know your plant's scientific name (genus and species). Cross-pollination is the transfer of pollen between plants. To save pure seed, you want to prevent cross-pollination between two different varieties in the same species. Planting just one variety in a species will help ensure that you save pure seed.

If you know your plant's scientific name, you will know which ones may cross-pollinate. For example, the squash we commonly grow in our gardens could fall into one of four species: *Cucurbita argyrosperma*, *C. maxima*, *C. moschata*, and *C. pepo*. These species won't typically cross-pollinate. On the other hand, *Brassica oleracea* includes broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, collards, kale, and kohlrabi—all plants you might think would not cross but actually do!

Know how your plants pollinate. Understanding how garden plants are pollinated will help you prevent cross-pollination. Some plants will self-pollinate before the flower is even open, making them less susceptible to cross-pollination. Examples of "selfers" are tomatoes, peas, and beans. On occasion, insects can cross-pollinate selfers. Plants that are insect-pollinated (squash and cucumbers) or wind-pollinated (corn and spinach) are more likely to cross-pollinate.

Know what your neighbors are growing. Some varieties, especially those that are wind or insect-pollinated, need a certain distance between varieties to ensure seed purity. For example, sunflowers must be isolated by ½ - 3 miles, and corn needs a distance of 2 miles. You may have to consider what your neighbors are growing.

Market mature vs. seed mature. Some fruits are market mature, or ready for eating, long before the seed is mature. Examples of this include cucumbers, eggplants, peas, beans, and cabbage. Take into consideration spacing and timing when planning your garden for seed saving. For example, imagine pulling a sweet carrot root out of the ground after about 2 months—there is not much plant showing above ground. However, when you harvest the seed, a carrot plant can be up to 4 feet tall and one year old!

For beginners, keep it simple! Remember, some plants are easier to save seed from than others. Saving seed from "selfers" is a good way to get started. Planting one variety per species can ensure your seed has not cross-pollinated.

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