



seed saving



A handful of dried tomato seeds.

what is it?

Seed saving is all about collecting and storing the seeds from your favourite fruit and veg, to grow them again in the future, or to swap them. Some seeds will be present in the fruit and veg themselves – tomatoes, pumpkins, beans etc, and some plants have to be left to 'go to seed'.

People have always saved and swapped seeds, and travelling seed merchants spread them around the country. Seed catalogues are a recent phenomenon. In the 1920s, seeds started to be standardised via government legislation, as people were giving all sorts of local names to the same seeds. Today you can still find 'standard seed' written on seed packets. This resulted in a huge loss of diversity as many unique, local varieties disappeared.

In the 1960s, there were still lots of small seed companies, and each one offered a wide range of seeds. But EU legislation standardised and restricted varieties in national lists, so that customers knew exactly what they were getting. Consumer protection might have been a noble aim, but in the process, a lot of diversity, interest, quirkiness and fun was lost. The seed industry was standardised and centralised, small companies went under, big companies got bigger, offering only a small range of seeds specially for large-scale growers, and culminating in the current attempts of the GM multinationals to control our food supply.

Some people continued to save their own seed however – because they knew they wouldn't be able to get them again if they were lost. Now, organisations like Garden Organic are calling on all gardeners to send them samples of seeds passed down through their family / local areas. They uncovered many thousands of old varieties, which have been named and added to the Heritage Seed Library.

what are the benefits?

Your seeds are free, and will suit your local topography, soil and climate. Non-standard, local seeds passed down through generations are 'heirloom' varieties – 'open pollinators' (nature produces the seeds, rather than seed companies choosing parent plants), which makes them genetically stronger. They tend to be grown organically, so roots go deeper to get nutrients, when they need them, to provide more nutritious food than non-organic, where fertilisers are put on top of the soil, encouraging shallower roots. Local varieties have a longer harvesting time, providing fresh food throughout the year; and tend to be taller, so can be harvested from lower down the plant first, and from higher up later on.

Once varieties are gone, they're gone – there's a loss of diversity that's not only a great shame in terms of taste and interest, but results in our food supply being more susceptible to pests or disease in future. Gene banks can preserve seeds, but there aren't enough of them, and sometimes they're closed due to lack of funding. The only way to maintain diversity is to grow, save and swap seeds ourselves.

Saved seeds are not genetically modified (GM). The GM industry is about standardisation *par excellence* – the enemy of seed saving – as well as (of course) enriching the enormous and already extremely wealthy biotech companies. It's about control of global food supply by a few giant corporations, not about the health effects of GM crops – which is what the corporate sector focuses on, to draw attention away from their global power grab. Their vision of farming is of vast fields of one crop, with seeds owned by one company – a disaster for diversity, food security, ecology and control of our food supply. Often you can't save the seed of GM crops – so-called 'terminator genes' have been spliced into them so that the seeds aren't viable, and farmers have to go back to the GM companies to buy more.



Find out where your nearest seed swap event is being held – this one is in Stoke Newington.



what can I do?

Get warmed up by attending seed swap events that are held all over the country, and in fact, all over the world (search for seed swap and your town). They're not just for people who have seeds already – you can take part by making a donation to a relevant charity. You'll be meet and get advice from keen gardeners. At big ones – like the one in Brighton, for example – you'll be able to listen to specially-invited speakers too. These events are important because it's now illegal to sell unusual seeds that are not on official national lists, and this is a way of guaranteeing their survival.

There are potato days too – and these usually include seed-swap tables. Seed potatoes aren't swapped, but they are sold – sometimes up to 100 varieties. As well as seed-swapping, there are seeds for sale, and there are plenty of keen gardeners willing to give advice on growing.

Wakehurst Place in Sussex is well worth a visit - the home of the Millennium Seed Bank, containing the seeds of around a fifth of all the world's plants. Then, well, just have a go. If you make mistakes, it's not a disaster, and you'll learn as you go. Each plant is different in terms of harvesting, extracting, drying, storing and planting seeds. Some plants are self-pollinating (peas, tomatoes, French beans), others are cross-pollinated by insects with other varieties (onions, beetroot, spinach), so your seed may not be exactly what you're expecting. Some vegetables are biennial, producing flowers and seed in their second year (carrots, chard, beetroot). For details of specific plants see books, Garden Organic's seed saving guidelines, 'From Seed to Seed' videos, or attend a course.



Parsnip seeds after drying – about to be extracted and stored.

Growing for seed is different from growing for food. You could leave the end plant on every row to go to seed, but make sure they're strong-looking specimens. When it comes to collecting, it's not always obvious what's the seed and what's the chaff. Once you've worked it out, after harvesting, shelling (if necessary) and drying, label the seeds and put into cold storage. This makes the seed go into dormancy – nature's way of stopping the seed germinating until the next season. Some seed families can be stored for longer than others. Parsnips can only really be stored for one season – so it's best to grow your own to make sure they're viable. At the other extreme, seeds of the cabbage family will store for 7 years; everything else is between these two.

Here's some seed saving advice for a couple of veg – tomatoes and beans.

Tomatoes – let them go quite squishy on the plant, then pick and scoop out the seeds and put in a saucer with a bit of water. Leave for 5 days until a mould starts to form. Sieve off the mouldy gunge, dry on a tablecloth for a few days, then pack, label and store in the fridge.

For big seeds like peas and beans, pick around October when the pods are papery and dry, and you can maybe hear the beans rattling inside. Bring indoors, spread on trays or plates and leave them on a cool, dry shelf (not in direct sunlight) for about two months, turning them every few days. Big seeds have a lot of moisture, which takes a long time to come down. A good way of telling if they're really dry is if they make a 'ping' instead of a 'thud' when you drop them on a plate.

Big seeds may be too big to store in the fridge. Keep them in brown paper bags in an unheated room. Small seeds can be kept in a fridge, between 5 and 13°C. Small seeds won't take up much room in your fridge unless you're doing it commercially.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/seed-saving for more info, courses, links and books, including:
- Julie Thompson-Adolf, *Starting & Saving Seeds*
- Nancy Bubel, *New Seed-Starters Handbook*
- William Weaver, *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening*
- diyseeds.org – wonderful range of films
- gardenorganic.org.uk/hsl - Heritage Seed Library
- seedsavers.org – huge resource

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