

Collecting and saving seeds



SAVING SEEDS from annual flowering plants is a good way to save money, as well as grow your favourites again the following year. It also allows you to grow non-hybrid heirloom plants that may be hard to obtain through seed catalogues or nurseries. Many gardeners also save seeds in order to swap them with others for varieties, often unusual or difficult to find, to try in their garden. Let us know if you're interested in arranging a seed swap for GGG members.

Before you start collecting seeds, here are a few things to keep in mind. The first is that plants grown from hybrid seed will not produce exact replicas of the plant from which you are taking the seed, so it may not be worth the effort to save these seeds. Also, if you grew more than one variety of the same plant, chances are good that the plants cross-pollinated, which again, produces plants don't resemble the parents. If you want to see what you will get, however, this may be a fun experiment! Finally, if you want to collect seeds from perennials, do so only from wildflower species. Most of the perennials you grow in your garden are cultivated varieties, and this means you will only get true "duplicates" from vegetative means, such as cuttings and divisions.

Collect seeds only from the healthiest plants. Wait until the flower has stopped blooming and the seed heads or pods are fully developed and have begun to dry. Picking off the pods too early will not produce viable seed. Use scissors to carefully remove the dried flower heads or pods. A good method is to tie several stalks together and hang them upside down in a brown paper bag in a dry location for several days. As the seed heads dry, the seeds will drop to the bottom of the bag.

The next step is to separate the debris or chaff from the actual seeds. This important because the chaff may contain moisture, which will cause mildew or mould that can infect and kill the seed. Before storing, make sure the seeds are completely dry. Spread the seeds on waxed paper, don't use paper towels or paper plates as the seeds may stick. The top of your fridge is a good warm place to store seeds for drying. The process could take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks.

Once dry, sort your seeds according to variety and place in individual envelopes or small paper bags. You might want to jot a quick description on each, including variety name, colour, height, and other characteristics that will help you when you plan next year's flower garden. Or place seeds in clean, airtight containers such as baby food jars or film canisters. Adding an anti-dessicant material, such as corn meal, will help reduce any moisture in the jars.

Store in your refrigerator, if there's room, or in a cool, dark, dry location. If stored improperly, warmth and moisture may cause the seeds to sprout prematurely or encourage the growth of mould. For best results, keep the container closed until you are ready to plant or swap the seeds. Properly stored, seeds will remain viable for up to several years, depending on the variety. Before planting, you can test your seeds for germination by placing a few between two sheets of wet paper towel. Roll up the towel and place inside a plastic bag so it won't dry out. Keep in a warm place, and check after a few days to see if the seeds have sprouted.