

Saving seeds

IT'S HARVEST TIME IN THE GARDEN and the fall clean-up is just beginning as the days get shorter and evening temperatures dip. With each garden, new or old, there is potential to take advantage of a harvest often wasted — many seeds are ripe and ready now, and can easily be gathered and saved for future use. Many gardeners miss the opportunity altogether and let the seeds drop, explode or hitch-hike out of the garden each fall. This is a shame because some of the plants from your garden may have a unique heritage, or a neighbour's hollyhock may be an interesting colour, or a plant may be rare or impossible to buy as seed. If you have something unique why not save some of the seed now for friends, family and fellow gardeners?

The first few weeks of fall are the time to collect seeds. Keen gardeners (or gardeners with hired help) usually attend to dead-heading as an ongoing item on their to-do list. The rest of us walk into our backyard one spring morning to discover a veritable nursery of seedlings and we wonder where they came from and what they are. Saving seed now will guarantee at least one thing - the seeds won't fall to the ground independently and start growing on their own next spring. Some plants produce seeds that simply fall out of the plant when they are ripe. Included in this group are lilies, columbines, trolius, penstemons, datura, heliopsis, sunflower and poppies. The ripe seeds of these plants are generally glossy brown or black. Once you are sure you are dealing with mature seed, simply clip the stems and pop them into envelopes, brown paper lunch bags or other suitable containers.

The ripe seed pods of poppies and columbines are like salt shakers. The tops of the ripe pods open and the clean ripe seed can be scattered out into the garden or tipped into an envelope for saving or sharing. The seeds of plants in the daisy family are a little trickier. Sometimes – just like dandelions - the seeds become airborne when ripe and leave home without any assistance from you. Other seeds are heavy and simply fall out of the mature seed head. In the case of sunflowers, the seeds are so heavy they don't just fall but are assisted by birds!

It is always best to wait until the seeds are fully ripe before collecting. If you have to tug the seeds off the head of a plant in the daisy family they may not be ripe enough to grow. If you are in a hurry to collect before the seeds are fully ripe, clip a long flower stalk and place that in a bag or on a warm, dry counter top. The seeds will continue to mature and will be ready to separate from the stalks when they start to drop off naturally.

Some seeds, such as those of the exotic Jewel-weed (also called touch-me-not) need to be collected as soon as they mature because if they are left alone they will explode all over your garden and it will be impossible to see where the individual seeds have gone until they sprout in the garden next spring. Projectile seeds such as these make traditional harvesting difficult. One way is to harvest the top of the plant before the seeds are ripe and put it in a large brown paper bag. As the seed pods ripen and explode the seeds will be contained in the bag.

One word of warning for would-be seed collectors: you may not always get the results you expect when you plant the seeds next year because the variable genetics of many of our hybrid seeds means the offspring are often "unpredictable." But then that just makes gardening more interesting, doesn't it?!