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Free Seeds!
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Friends... the secret is out: You can “grow your own” garden seeds. Sounds simple, right? And it is! Here are easy steps to selecting, collecting, and protecting your very own seed supply.

But why, you query? Isn't it a lot easier to just buy seeds? Or even easier, to simply plant starts?

Here's what garden geeks say: It's surprisingly simple. Seeds make great garden gifts. It saves money, especially if you want to try multiple varieties. Seeds promote genetic diversity, and you can trade seeds with your fellow gardeners for varieties that appeal to you but aren't readily available in stores or nurseries. Heirloom seeds have a story, like “Mortgage Lifter Tomato.” Some seeds have nostalgia value; maybe these seeds came from your mother's flower garden or your great Uncle Edward who always grew the best sweet corn.

SELECTION is key to your success. Select seeds from “open-pollinated” plants. Open-pollinated is anything that isn't a hybrid. Check any seed catalogue or seed display; if there is a designation near the name of the plant that says F1 or Hybrid, don't save seeds from those plants. (They will not reliably reproduce the plant/fruit/flower that you like.) But, if the plant or seed packet says “heirloom” or “open pollinated,” you're good to go.

It can be a bit tricky because there are both open-pollinated and hybrid varieties of many plants. One seed catalogue currently cluttering the desk lists several types of sweet bell peppers. Among the tasty offerings are “Sweet Sunrise,” an F1 Hybrid. Another is “Sweet Chocolate,” which is an Heirloom or Open-pollinated pepper. Don't get me wrong -- I have nothing against hybrids. They may have advantages over heirlooms in terms of disease resistance, productivity or interesting flower color or shape. Just avoid collecting seeds from them.

It's possible that plants will hybridize right in your garden. In other words, the lemon cucumbers and the pickling cucumbers could pull a “double cross” on you, and produce seeds that are a mix of the two. For beginning seed savers, the easiest and most reliable veggies to work with are peas, beans, peppers, lettuce and tomatoes. These upright citizens are not only open-pollinated, but “self pollinated.” This means that each plant is likely to pollinate itself, and not get hinky with neighboring plants of the same species. The same rules apply for herbs and flowers. If you love sunflowers and want to enjoy masses of them, make sure you plant “Big Smile” (open-

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pollinated), not “Firecracker” (F1). Then collect the seeds in the Fall, right before the birds get all of them! Or better still, just let the seeds fall where they will. You will have Big Smiles everywhere!

COLLECTION: OK, now you know which plants to collect seeds from. The next essential concept is patience. Wait until the tomato is over-ripe, mushy, disgusting and almost ready to fall off the vine. Leave the spring peas on the plant until the husks turn brown and crisp, and ditto for the pole beans. Of course, eat all the delicious veggies you want, but just remember to leave a few behind for collecting seeds later.

Wet seeds, such as tomatoes or peppers, need to be rinsed and then dried off on paper towels before storage. Dry seeds, beans and peas, can simply be popped out of those crispy hulls. Try to get rid of any debris, remnants of pods, etc. That is where insects can lurk and wreak havoc in your seed supply. Small seeds like those from lettuce and some flowers can be hard to collect. When the flower is past its prime and the seeds seem dry and ready to fall, put a paper bag over the flower, then cut the stem, turn upside down, give it a few shakes and voila -- instant seed collection.

PROTECTION: Dark, dry and cool is best. Put your seeds in sealed paper envelopes or small jars and store them in the refrigerator. Don't forget to label them: name, date of collection, and source (“Aunt Mary” or “Seed Library” or “Purloined after dark from the house down the street with the amazing Cosmos flowers”). This is important for several reasons. To help remember what worked and what didn't. Also remove outdated seeds from your stash; the rule of thumb is that they will lose vitality after three years of storage.

There you go. Simple, eh?

Join UCCE Master Gardeners Paula Bertram and O.J. Gow to learn more in-depth information on seed saving at our upcoming, free Master Gardener class. “Seed Saving and Garden Journaling” will be offered Wednesday, September 9, 2015 at the Cameron Park Community Center; class is from 9:00 a.m. to noon at 2502 Country Club Drive, in Cameron Park. Free seeds will be available!

There is no Master Gardener public education class this Saturday, August 29, 2015. UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions at local farmers markets, and Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County website at <http://ucanr.edu/edmg>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.

Mark your calendars: Saturday, October 3, 2015 is the grand opening of the Sherwood Demonstration Garden at Folsom Lake College – El Dorado Center, 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville. The Sherwood Demonstration Garden is a wonderful opportunity to view the wide variety of plants, fruit trees and vegetables that grow well in our foothill environment. Master Gardeners will be on hand to offer advice and answer questions.

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