



Saving and Storage of Plant Seeds

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In growing plants from seed, it's important to understand the difference between open-pollination and heirloom seeds, and seeds produced by hybrid plants. Open-pollinated seeds are as nature created them, and they are pollinated by insects, birds and butterflies. The openly pollinated seed will produce a duplicate of the plant that produced the seed. An open-pollinated seed is an heirloom if it existed many years ago.

Plant breeders create hybrid seeds by crossbreeding two compatible types of plants. The reason for cross-pollination is to produce plants that have unique traits such as more vigor, uniformity and disease-resistance. Seeds from hybrids are not genetically like the parent plant. The seed produced by a hybrid may be inferior to the plant it came from, perhaps reverting to one of the cross-pollinated parent plants.

How plants develop seeds and the time to harvest them differs for each plant. No matter if they are in pods or flower heads, they are close to where the flower appeared. Wait for it to finish enlarging and changing color and beginning to dry out or the pod split open. Phlox and Impatiens seedpods explode. Collect before they are completely dried out. However, collecting too early will give an unviable seed.

The easiest annuals to grow from seeds include bachelor's button, cosmos, larkspur, marigold, sunflower, cleome, nasturtium and zinnia. Seeds that are easiest to collect are allium, bachelor's button, calendula, four o'clock, nasturtium, marigold, cleome and columbine. Self-sowers (plants that reseed themselves) are alyssum, clarkia, California poppy, larkspur, snapdragon, 4 o'clock, feverfew, coreopsis, cleome, cornflowers, rudbeckia, and sweet pea.

To prepare wet fruit seeds, let the seeds ferment at room temperature for one to two days. Wash the juice off to prepare for the drying process. Drying can be done on a flat surface on newspaper

or paper towels for a week. Write seed names on the paper. The maximum temperature to dry the seed is 95 degrees F.

Seeds are alive and during storage they are using their internal resources to stay alive. Seeds should be planted as soon as possible or safely stored (see safe storage procedures below). It is best to use them in the current year. Onions, parsley and parsnips lose viability after one year. Stored sweet corn and parsnip seeds have low germination rates. Other vegetables are less likely to sprout after three years.

Proper storage of seeds is vital. Keep them in a cool dry place, not in direct sunlight. Moisture and temperature are the most important factors, as both dampness and excessive heat will shorten the life of a seed. Do not go above the maximum of 75 degrees F. To ensure dry conditions, place the air-dried seeds in small paper packets, envelopes or laminated foil packets and label them with the plant name, date and other pertinent information. Tightly close paper in jars to store. Seeds can be stored in the refrigerator as the ambient temperature is 40 degrees F.

Seventy-five percent of collected seeds will produce vigorous and sturdy seedlings depending on the seed viability and the environmental conditions in which the seeds were kept: don't hesitate to collect seeds and re-create your favorite plants!

Learn about creating your own plants at this Saturday, October 12th free Master Gardener public education class: How to Clone Plants: Divisions, Cuttings, and Layering. The three-hour class will demonstrate different methods of plant propagation, and include interactive audience instruction to allow attendees to bring home their own plant starts. Class is from 9:00 a.m. to noon in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Drive, Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Gardeners/ and <http://www.facebook.com/pages/El-Dorado-County-Master-Gardeners/164653119129>.