



Free Seeds!
By Paula Bertram
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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. Why bother, you ask -- isn't it a lot easier to just buy seeds? Easier yet, just buy plants at the nursery?

Maybe so. But here are some reasons why you might want to try: It's surprisingly simple, seeds make great gifts, and seed-gathering saves money, especially if you want to try multiple varieties. You will promote genetic diversity, and can trade seeds with your fellow gardeners for varieties that appeal to you but aren't readily available in nurseries. Heirlooms have a story -- like “Mortgage Lifter Tomato.” Seeds can have nostalgic value: those orange cosmos are from my mother's garden.

SELECTION is key to your success. Only save seeds from open-pollinated plants. Open-pollinated is anything that isn't a hybrid. Check any seed catalogue or seed rack. 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. Beware: there are both open-pollinated and hybrid varieties of many plants. For example, a seed catalogue may list several kinds of sweet peppers. Among the tempting offerings are “Sweet Sunrise,” an F1 Hybrid. Another is “Sweet Chocolate” which is an Heirloom or open-pollinated pepper. Hey, there is nothing wrong with hybrids. They may have advantages over heirlooms in terms of disease resistance, productivity, or interesting flower color or shape, etc. 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 are peas, beans,

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peppers, lettuce and tomatoes. These garden favorites are often “self-pollinated.” This means that each plant is likely to pollinate itself, and not get playful with neighboring plants of the same species. 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-pollinated), not “Firecracker” (F1). Then collect the seeds in the Fall, right before the birds get all of them! Good luck with that, by the way! 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, 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, you can eat all the delicious veggies you want -- just remember to leave a few behind for collecting seeds later.

Wet seeds, like tomatoes or peppers, need to be rinsed and dried off on paper towels before storage. Dry seeds, such as beans and peas, can simply be popped out of those crispy hulls. Try to get rid of any debris, pieces of pods, etc as that's where insects can lurk and damage 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, source (“Aunt Mary” or “Seed Library” or “Purloined after dark from the neighbor”). Labelling is important for several reasons. You want to remember what worked and what didn't, and you also want to remove outdated seeds from your stash. The rule of thumb is that they will lose vitality after 3 years of storage.

There you go. Simple, eh? Learn more about seed saving and garden journaling at a free Master Gardener class on September 17th at Folsom Lake College – El Dorado Center from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. - hope to see you there!

Join Master Gardeners and Master Food Preservers for a free class today, Sept 7th, Grapes from Garden to Table, from 9:00 a.m. to noon at Cameron Park Community Center, 2502 Country Club Drive in Cameron Park.

This Saturday join Master Gardener Barry Wold from 10:00 a.m. to noon at Sherwood Demonstration Garden for demonstrations on gardening through the seasons. Barry explains planting, thinning and pest control needs – and answers your questions! Weather permitting (garden is closed at 95 degrees or hotter). Sherwood Demonstration Garden, behind Folsom Lake College – El Dorado Center, 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville.

Saturday Sept 24 is the Fall Master Gardener Plant Sale from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at Sherwood Demonstration Garden. Hundreds of beautiful plants at reasonable prices – cash or checks only, please.

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UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County 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. 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 Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.