Seed saving basics

Germinating and caring for seedlings

For tomatoes, peppers or any other seeds that you plan to start indoors, you will need soil and some sort of container to germinate your seeds in. You will have best results if you use a sterile seed starting medium and the container must have holes to allow for water drainage.

Seeds do not need sun or light to sprout, but they do need to be kept in a warm place and moist until germination takes place. You can use some sort of clear plastic cover over the containers to retain warmth and moisture. After germination occurs you will need to move the seedlings into a sunny window or place them under a source of artificial light and remove the cover to allow ventilation.

About a week before you intend to transplant your seedlings, they will need to be gradually exposed to the outdoors, a process called hardening off. Place them in a sheltered area outside for a few hours at a time, gradually increasing the time and amount of direct sunlight exposure. You can plant your seedlings in the ground after they are hardened off and when you are sure the risk of frost has passed, usually the end of May for our area.

Care for you plants by watering and feeding as required, usually once a week for watering and fertilize them once a month with a good quality organic fertilizer. This will generally give good results.

Plant selection

Tomatoes, peppers, beans and peas are good choices for seed saving. These plants have flowers that are self-pollinating, and seeds that require little or no special treatment before storage. Seeds from biennial crops such as carrots or beets are harder to save, since the plants need two growing seasons to set seed.

Plants with separate male and female flowers, like corn and vine crops, may cross-pollinate, so it is difficult to keep the seed strain pure. A stand of sweet corn can be pollinated by popcorn from a nearby garden on a windy day. The flavor of the current sweet corn crop will be affected, and a crop grown from these seeds will be neither good sweet corn nor good popcorn.

Cucumbers, melons, squash, pumpkins, and gourds can all be cross-pollinated by insects. Although the quality of the current crop will not be affected, seeds from such a cross will grow into vines with fruit unlike that of the parent plant--often inferior in flavor and other characteristics.

When saving seeds, chose open-pollinated varieties rather than hybrids. If open-pollinated varieties self-pollinate or are cross-pollinated by other plants of the same variety, they set seed which grows into plants that are still very similar to the parent plant, bearing similar fruit and setting seeds that will produce more similar plants. Open-pollinated varieties may be "heirlooms," varieties that have been passed down from one generation of gardeners to the next, or they may be more recent selections.

Hybrid vegetable plants are products of crosses between two different varieties, combining traits of the parent plants. Sometimes a combination is particularly good, producing plants with outstanding vigor, disease resistance, and productivity. Hybrid seeds are generally more expensive as they cost more to produce.

Hybrid plants, such as 'Big Boy', 'Beefmaster' and 'Early Girl' tomatoes will produce viable seed. Plants grown from that seed, however, will not be just like the hybrid parents; instead, they will be a

completely new combination of the good and bad traits of the plants that were initially crossed. It's impossible to predict just how the seedling plant will perform or what qualities the fruit will have.

Some tomato varieties are not hybrids; instead they are open-pollinated types such as 'Big Rainbow', 'San Marzano' and 'Brandywine'. Seed produced by these varieties will grow into plants very similar to the parent plants, with nearly identical fruit. All the seeds in the library are open-pollinated varieties that will come true from seed.

When harvesting, select the plants from which you want to save seed. Choose only the most vigorous plants with the best-tasting fruit as parents for the next year's crop. Do not save seed from weak or off-type plants.

Harvesting seed

Saving tomato seeds is easy. Allow fruits to ripen fully and scoop out the seeds, along with the gel surrounding them, before you eat or cook the tomatoes. Put the seeds and gel in a glass jar with some water. Stir or swirl the mixture twice a day. The mixture will ferment and the seeds should sink to the bottom within five days. Pour off the liquid, rinse the seeds and spread them out to dry on paper towels.

Saving pepper seeds is even easier. Allow some fruits to stay on the plants until they become fully ripe and start to wrinkle. Remove the seeds from the peppers and spread them out to dry. Use gloves when handling hot pepper varieties.

Save pea and bean seeds by allowing the pods to ripen on the plants until they're dry and starting to turn brown, with the seeds rattling inside. This may be as long as a month after you would normally harvest the peas or beans to eat. Strip the pods from the plants and spread them out to dry indoors. They should dry at least two weeks before shelling, or you can leave the seeds in the pods until planting time.

Storage

You can store seeds in tightly-sealed glass containers. Store any different varieties of seeds in individual paper packets, together in a large container. Keep seeds dry and cool. A temperature between 0° and 5°C is ideal, so your refrigerator can be a good place to store seeds, but not necessary, as any cool, dry dark place will do.

A small amount of silica-gel desiccant added to each container will absorb moisture from the air and help keep the seeds dry. Silica gel is sold in bulk for drying flowers at craft supply stores. Powdered milk can also be used as a desiccant. Use one to two tablespoons of milk powder from a freshly opened package. Wrap the powder in a piece of cheesecloth or a facial tissue and place it in the container with the seeds. Powdered milk will absorb excess moisture from the air for about six months.

Be sure to label your saved seeds with their name, variety, and the date you collected them. It's too easy to forget the details by the following spring. Use saved seed within one year; the older the seed the lower the germination and vigor.

If you experience any problems

You can reach us by email at EqualGroundCommunityGardens@gmail.com or through our website www.EGCGbrant.com and we'll help you sort out any issues you may have. **Happy Growing!**