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## ABCs of Seed-Keeping

Have you ever thought of the many stories held inside of a single seed? Every seed has a lineage passed through time, through many hands and much further back than any of us can recall.

Seed-keeping is a phrase I first heard from Angela Ferguson of the Onondaga Nation and I think it encapsulates well the relationship we build as we grow alongside our gardens from the seeds we plant to the seeds we gather.

You may have heard it called saving seeds or any other name, but this short guide is designed to give you a glimpse into the sacred art of becoming a seed keeper.

It is now more important than ever to return to these ancient traditions as seed patenting, genetic modification and corporate seed companies threaten biodiversity and food sovereignty.

This is by no means close to a comprehensive guide, but should hopefully give you the confidence to begin to preserve seed lineage in your little corner of the universe.

For simplification this guide will be broken into two parts, dry-seeded crops and wet-seeded crops. We will not be going deeply into plant anatomy, vitality, disease, diversity, post-harvest, isolation distance or any of the other many aspects that affect seeds. For more thorough information you can check out the resources listed at the end of this guide.

## **Some basics**

When becoming a seed-keeper, the type of plants you are growing from is important. It is ideal to grow from open-pollinated plants. This term refers to plants pollinated naturally by birds, insects, wind, or human hands rather than hybridized or genetically modified.

Although it is sometimes possible to de-hybridize a seed, it will likely take strong selection over many seasons to produce a consistently similar variety, called "true". Seed should never be saved from genetically modified plants and it is highly advised not to have these plants in your garden so they do not cross with your other plants.

Only plants of the same species will cross with each other naturally. So you don't have to worry about your peppers crossing with your marigolds. Even members of the same family and even the same genus will not cross. Different varieties within the same species will cross.

This means that for the most part, if we are not too particular about some crossing between a few different varieties, we are free to gather seed from most plants in the garden and still grow a similar plant the following year. There are some notable exceptions, like squash that require a large isolation distance not possible in a backyard, and can produce some wacky offspring if crossed.

## **Dry-seeded & wet-seeded plants**

### **Dry-seeded**

A dry-seeded plant is exactly what it sounds like, a plant whose seeds dry naturally on the plant. These are the more straight-forward plants to start with and I recommend choosing an annual dry-seeded plant for beginners.

Some easy starters are Cilantro/coriander, Arugula and Lettuce.

To save seed from these plants, you simply need to avoid cutting the growing tip during the season, then let the plant go to flower and eventually produce seed. At a home garden scale, you can simply remove the seed as they become dry, leaving underdeveloped seeds for another day. If you wish to gather entire plants, it is important to assess daily when the most seeds have reached maturity without risking them dropping off the plant naturally and self-sowing.

It is helpful to know what a dry seed for your variety looks like so you can gauge when to gather your seeds or know how to find them.

### **Wet-seeded**

A wet-seeded plant means that the seed is within the fruit and therefore must be removed and processed.

Some easy starters are Cucumbers and Tomatoes.

To save seed from these plants you want the fruit to come to full maturity. In the case of tomatoes, peppers and other fruits that reach a full size when ready to eat, these can be both enjoyed in your salad and then preserved. In the case of cucumbers, you will want to let the fruit grow on the vine well past edible phase until it begins to yellow.

For wet-seeded plants, you will separate the seeds from the main flesh and place in a container like a mason jar at room temperature, adding water if needed and stirring 2-3 times a day for about 3 days. This helps separate the seed from the flesh, minimizing mold and pathogen growth in storage. For plants with drier interiors, like peppers, you may choose to skip this step. You may see a small amount of white mold develop, it is harmless.

After the 2-4 days, rinse the seeds with a strainer and spray nozzle, then let dry completely on a paper or plate.

All seeds should be stored in a cool, dark and dry environment until they are ready to be sown.

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I hope this short overview has given you the confidence to try and gather seeds in your garden and preserve these varieties for generations to come.

Additional Resources:

<https://www.freedseedfederation.org/seed-school>

**Seed to Seed** by Suzanne Ashworth

**The Seed Garden: The Art and Practice of Seed Saving**  
*published by Seed Savers Exchange*

If you'd like to grow food in community, learn to garden, or work with me 1-1, you can learn more on my website <https://emergencegardens.com/>.

