



Growing Guru



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WILL OLD SEEDS STILL GERMINATE?

Seeds may not look alive, but they are if the embryo inside can still germinate. In this soaked bean seed, where the two cotyledons (stored food) have been separated, it is easy to see the "baby leaves and root" in between.

I suspect a lot of gardeners acquire more seeds and seed packets than they grow in any given year. Ideally seeds should be planted in the year indicated at the bottom of the seed packet (where the country of origin is also shown). As you can see in the picture, I still have a wide range of old seeds in my collection.

Old seeds may indeed germinate and grow into viable plants, but it depends upon a lot of factors, including how the seeds were stored (cool, dry, & dark are best), how long each variety can remain viable (most are 1-5 years), and whether you can provide the best environment for germination (including those that need a cold period/stratification).

A quick way to test for viability in larger seeds (corn, beans, peas) is to place in water for a few minutes. Those that float should be tossed (as these two 4-year-old sugar snap peas). Dry the rest of the seeds until planting time or plant after soaking overnight, which allows for good water absorption.



A more accurate way to determine if your old seeds are worth planting into the garden is to place on a moist paper towel a few seeds (10 is easy for figuring percent germination) and to seal in a plastic bag in a steady warm place. Start checking for germination in the number of days indicated for emergence on the seed packet. Germinated seeds can be planted directly with bits of attached paper towel if treated gently.



See these [germination trial pictures](#) which illustrate a way to test several seed types at once and more easily observe day to day. For information about normal viability for a wide variety of vegetable, flower, and herb seeds, see the charts from [Johnny's Selected Seeds](#) and [Clear Creek Seeds](#). Easy-to-read charts for vegetables have been produced by the [Chicago Botanic Garden](#) and [A Growing Garden](#). One of my favorite websites is [Gardening Know How](#), because it has a search feature at the top in addition to several tabs that lead to a wealth of information. Most articles link to additional info as well.