

How to Save Flower Seeds for Next Year

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Photo Credit

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In the fall, save your zinnia seeds, sunflower seeds, and more! Remember that after flowers bloom, their seeds remain, containing the promise of spring! We'll show you how simple it is to save flower seeds for next year—plus, which flowers are best for seed-saving.

What was once a prolific season of non-stop growth with its vining, flowering and blooming burst of colors, slowly gives way in autumn. The creeping fingers of fall and the subtle hues and cues that the curtain is closing in on the verdant world of plants starts to slither in. Generally, I crawl into the fall season myself welcoming the clearing of the garden beds and its timely offering of a much-needed season to catch one's breath.

But before autumn fades, let's walk outside and collect some of the flower seeds still on the plant. Yes, it is Seed Harvesting Time!



“Seeds are living things...intimately connected and intertwined with story and lineage and place and people.” –Rowan White, Sierra Seeds

Why Bother Saving Seeds Anyways?

Saving seeds is a gift to your future self! Seeds are saved to keep you in a solid supply for your future sowing, to gift to friends, neighbors and relatives or to participate in Seed Swaps, Seed Circles or supply a Seed Library in your town or neighborhood.

1. **Save Money.** Seed saving can save you money. For the specialty varieties notably, the cost of the seeds and their viability can make buying them impractical or a frivolity and ever so quickly the addiction of gardening and seed starting can quickly require a bunch of cash to keep you supplied. Seeds don't last forever and do need to be replaced. Saving your own seeds as a cost-saving mechanism is certainly a worthwhile reason.
2. **Adaptation.** The factor that I feel strongly about is that seeds that have endured the specific microclimates of your growing locale will be better adapted, more resilient and have stronger defenses going into the next growing season. When farming, finding flower varieties that thrive in our environment with all of the weather changes and pests that we experience can make a huge impact on the blooms that do well and those that don't.

3. **Self-selection.** Beauty, size, vigor, disease-resistance. When deciding that you want to save seeds you can take your time throughout the season to observe your plants and their flowers and choose and mark the flowers that you want to continue to cultivate for your seed collection. Some more factors to consider might be choosing for biggest bloom, color preference, earliest blooming or most fragrant. These factors and more can go into very thoughtful breeding programs and then sometimes, we also just wing it at the end of the season and cut like mad all the blooms and save all the seeds and cross all the fingers. There is always next year to be more, selective.
4. **Sovereignty.** Seeds represent people, places and cultures. The efforts of many large-scale corporations to privatize and monetize through patenting the genetic diversity and availability of many species of plants could threaten the types of seed that is available to be saved and shared freely. Saving of seeds, whether flowers or food, is the basis of many communities' ability to feed and sustain itself.



Are All Seeds Worth Saving?

Many old-fashioned **annuals** grow quite well from seeds collected and stored at home. Zinnias, sunflowers, cosmos, marigolds, California poppies, impatiens, petunias, cleome, snapdragons, nigella and calendula are among the easiest seeds to harvest and replant in the spring. They'll bloom as usual within the season!

Perennial seeds can also be saved. Just keep in mind that some perennials may take a couple years from seed to maturity. So, it's not the fastest way to go, but it's certainly more cost-effective than buying starter plants at a nursery. And why not? It's a fun gamble!

Before you start collecting, you need to know that it may not be worth saving **all** flower seeds from the garden. It is helpful to know whether the plant that you are wanting to collect from is a Hybrid or Open-pollinated Variety.

- **Hybrid** varieties will not return as the exact same variety. Hybrids come from plant breeders who purposely cross-pollinate different varieties to combine the positive traits of both. Seeds saved from a hybrid usually revert back to a distant ancestor that is not the same as the parent plant. It's better to take cuttings or divisions of a hybrid plant to get an exact copy. Or, just buy fresh seed each year.
- In standard or **open-pollinated** plant, varieties have more or less stabilized in their habits from one generation to the next. They are often grown in fields where they self and cross pollinate. Wind and insects carry the pollen from one plant to another, and the seeds that are produced will create plants that are fairly similar, but not usually as uniform as hybrids will be.

Seed-saving is most effective for the amateur or non-breeder, with open-pollinated varieties as they will be mostly true to their parent plant. I have certainly had plenty of hybrids resow in my garden beds and have found them to differ from the variety originally sown. Some have been pleasant enough to keep however they are not seeds you can count on to be true. If you're feeling adventurous, go for it and save from either. If you want to stick to what you like, save seeds from open-pollinated plants only.



When to Harvest Seeds?

Seed harvesting happens in most regions the fall. The seeds of most flowers are ready to harvest about a month after the blossoms fade, when the seed heads turn brown.

Any sunny day after the dew has dried off is the best time of the day to gather your flower heads for processing. With flowers, we are able to use a dry processing method by allowing the seeds to fully dry on the plant before collecting.

By allowing the flower heads to hang on the flowers past their floral prime and let the autumn winds dry them out, our work becomes that much easier.



How to Save Flower Seeds

When the plants have fully turned brown and dried up is the best time to go around and gather the ripe or mature flower seeds, the viable entities that contain all of the starter food and genetic information wrapped in their protective covering, for next seasons beauty.

1. Gather ripe seeds on a dry, sunny day.
2. Using your garden clips, simply cut and collect the stalks or just flower heads into the labeled bag.
3. At home, you will separate out the seeds from the chaff. Clean the seeds by removing any husks or pods. Try to separate as much debris from the seeds as possible since chaff can harbor insect eggs or fungi.
4. Be sure they are dry, to a crisp. Even if the seeds appear dry when you collect them, spread them out on paper, cookie sheet, or screen in a cool and darkened area to dry for about a week before storing. Good air flow with a gentle fan can help move the drying process along.
5. My system for saving seed is simple. I write out the name and variety of the flower that I am collecting on a small brown paper bag and then cut the flower heads into the bags. At home, I process each variety based on how dry or ready for storage each seed is.



How Do You Store Seeds for Harvest?

Seeds that are ready to be stored for the winter are collected in small containers and then funneled into small paper envelopes where I have recorded the name, variety, and the date of harvest. These seed envelopes need to be airtight and will be stored in a dry, cool space to best preserve their viability for next season.

The factors that alter the health of the seed would be moisture, light, pests and temperature swings. By keeping them stored safely away in a dry, cool spot away from light, moisture and pests will ensure their safe-keeping for next spring.

If humidity is a problem, put a little powdered milk in the bottom of your envelope. The fridge or freezer can also be a great place for seed storage because the colder the seeds are kept, the longer they will remain viable for future germination.



12 Annual Flowers to Harvest Seeds From

Many of the seeds from annual flowers that we love to plant can be saved for future use. As well, many perennials can too as a great way to propagate your stock. Below is a list of some of the more common annual flowers many of which I save yearly here on the farm.

- Bachelors Button
- Cleome
- Cosmos
- Coneflower
- Calendula
- Delphinium
- Impatiens
- Marigold
- Morning Glories
- Nasturtium
- Pansies
- Poppy
- Rudbeckia
- Scabiosa
- Snapdragon

- Sunflower
- Zinnia

Some Tips for Beginners

- Flowers with large seeds are especially easy to collect, including **sunflowers**, **morning glories**, **cosmos**, **hollyhocks**, **calendula**, and **zinnias**.
- Plants like **delphiniums**, **cleome**, **nicotiana**, **nigella**, **mallows**, and **foxglove** have small seeds that are contained in large seed pods, making them easy to harvest, too.
- With some plants such as **poppies** and columbine, seed collecting is as easy as waiting till the pods dry on the plants and putting them in an envelope.
- **Coneflowers**, **black-eyed Susans**, and **other daisy-like flowers** hold their seeds longer making them easy to collect.
- Pansies and impatiens, on the other hand, tend to scatter their seed before you even notice it is ripe.
- If the seeds you are waiting for might drop before you can collect them, try tying a small paper or cloth bag over the ripening seed pods.



Field Notes for Seed-Saving

- If you save a lot of seeds, the box in the photo above is very helpful for saving and organizing seeds based on the weeks that I plan to sow them. By storing in small resealable envelopes, I am able to keep moisture out and reseal as needed.

- When collecting seed heads directly from the field, cut into paper bags. Allow these labeled bags with the seeds inside to sit inside for a day or two to fully be sure they are dry. Give the bag a good shake and you will find a bunch of the seeds already dispersed. Clean the seed from the chaff with a screen if necessary and store directly.
- Save baby jars, small yogurt or jam jars with lids for seed saving throughout the winter to garner a good supply for harvest seed saving.
- Germination test: before planting out all your saved seeds you might want to do a little test to see if the saved seeds are viable. According to Penn State Extension, simply wet a paper towel, (I love the heavy duty blue industrial paper towels because they hold moisture longer than the regular kitchen ones), and set out a small portion of your seeds, at least 25, on the dampened (not dripping) paper towel. Keep it in a warm place, moistened, and check back in 5-10 days. If fewer than 85-90% of seeds have germinated then it's best to discard the seeds and start with fresh new seed.



Happy Seed Saving!

Interested in saving vegetable seeds? [Learn more!](#)

Flowers

Seeds

The image shows the cover of a book titled 'The Old Farmer's Almanac Flower Gardener's Handbook'. The cover is white with a grid of 24 small square photographs of various colorful flowers. The text on the cover includes 'THE OLD FARMER'S ALMANAC' at the top, followed by 'FLOWER GARDENER'S HANDBOOK' in large, bold, purple letters.

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