

Seed Saving: Easy Annual Vegetables and Flowers

Plant	When to gather seed	Processing
beans and peas (self-pollinating)	Leave in pods on plant until they rattle.	Remove seeds from pods and spread them out to dry.
pepper (self- or insect-pollinated)	Gather from a mature pepper (if possible, one that is fully red).	Scrape out seeds and spread them out to dry. They're ready to store when they break rather than bend.
tomato (self-pollinating)	Harvest when fruits are fully ripe. Seeds have a gelatinous coating to prevent them from sprouting inside the fruit. Squeeze seeds into a bowl when tomatoes are fully ripe.	Ferment mixture by adding water and letting it stand at room temperature for 3 to 4 days, stirring a few times a day to prevent mold. The good seeds will sink to the bottom and can be spread out to dry.
eggplant (self- or insect-pollinated)	Leave fruit on vine until it's hard, dull, and off-colored.	Cut the fruit in half and pull flesh away from seed area. Wash and rinse seeds before spreading them out to dry. If seeds are hard to remove, grate or blend the bottom part of the fruit (with the ripest seeds), put the pulp in a bowl of water, and squeeze the gratings with your fingers. Good seeds will sink to the bottom.
cucumbers (insect-pollinated)	Seed is ready once fruits have turned golden/orange and are getting mushy.	Cut fruit in half, scrape seeds into a bowl, and remove their slimy coating by rubbing them in a sieve with water. Rinse before spreading out to dry. (Some recommend using the same treatment as listed for tomatoes.)
summer squash (insect-pollinated)	Seed is ready once fruits are hard (cannot dent with a fingernail). This may be after frost.	Cut open and scrape seeds into a bowl; wash and rinse them before spreading them out to dry.
watermelon (insect-pollinated)	Harvest seeds from ripe fruit.	Before drying, rinse seeds in a strainer using a drop of dish soap to remove sugar.
lettuce (self-pollinating)	Gather seeds once the plant sends up a stalk and half of the flowers have turned white with fluff. (If you wait too long, the seeds may fly away.)	Rub out and separate seeds from seedheads. Shake the seeds up and down on a tray or screen and gently blow away the lighter chaff.
annual flowers (calendula, cleome, cosmos, impatiens, marigold, morning glory, sunflower, sweet pea, zinnia)	Gather seeds once these flowers have wilted and seed capsules or pods appear dry.	Separate chaff by hand or by shaking on screen, as above.

***Special Note**

Although you can easily save and replant many types of garden seeds without a lot of background knowledge, it is important to know whether a plant is a hybrid variety.

Although there are naturally occurring hybrid plants, the term is usually used to refer to varieties that are created when plant breeders cross two specific parent lines to create a new variety. For example, one parent line might produce a tomato with thick skin (a good trait for shipping and storage) but the fruits are small. The other parent line might produce especially large fruits (desirable on supermarket shelves), but with thin skin that's prone to splitting. By crossing these two parent lines, a breeder might create a new, hybrid variety that features the desirable traits of the two parents: large, thick-skinned fruit.

However, if you save seeds from this new hybrid tomato and grow them out, the results are unpredictable. The plant might produce similar tomatoes, or the fruits might express less-desirable traits that harken back to one of the parent lines. Some of the seeds might even be sterile and won't germinate. So don't plan to save seeds from hybrid plants unless you are doing so as part of an experiment.

You can't tell from looking at a plant if it's a hybrid; however, seed catalogs and packets will tell you if seed is hybrid.

The term open-pollinated simply refers to plants that aren't the result of hybridization by plant breeders. These plants either transfer pollen internally, within a flower or between flowers on the same plant (called self-pollinating), or their pollen is transferred by wind or insects.

Seeds of self-pollinating plants generally produce offspring that closely resemble the parents. Plants pollinated by wind (such as corn and spinach) and those pollinated by insects (such as squash and cucumbers) may produce a next generation that resembles a parent, or they may cross with other varieties to turn up something entirely unique.