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Saving Seeds Saves Money

Summer-blooming annuals, perennials and vegetables are setting seeds at this time. Harvesting the seeds, storing them and then growing a new crop of plants next year is easy, fun, saves money and allows you to share seeds with friends.

If you decide you're interested in saving seeds there are a few things you need to keep in mind.

A large number of vegetables and some annual flowers are F1 hybrids. This will be stated on the seed package or description of the plant. When grown, these seeds produce vigorous, productive and uniform plants. Plants grown from F1 hybrids do not inherit all of the desirable characteristics or uniformity of the parents. Seeds of F1 hybrids should be purchased each year and not saved.

Cross-pollination is also a problem. This may occur when two or more different cultivars of the same plant are growing in the garden. Insects visit many flowers and can easily transfer pollen from the flowers of one plant to the flowers of another. Seeds that resulted from cross-pollination will produce offspring that blend characteristics of both parents. So if you're planning to save seeds, always try to isolate cultivars from one another or only plant one cultivar – particularly if you want the resulting plants to closely resemble the plants you collect the seeds from.

Another problem is that gardeners often don't know what the seeds look like. That, of course, means they don't know what to look for when harvesting seed. Experience really is the only way to learn what the seeds of a plant look. You might think that the seeds would always be obvious, but seeds come in a bewildering array of shapes, colors and sizes. They are not always easy to distinguish.

When collecting your own seeds, make sure they are mature before you harvest them. If you harvest seeds that are not fully mature, the embryo inside

the seed is not fully formed and cannot finish development once it's detached from the plant. As a result, the seeds will not be viable and will not come up when planted. Harvesting immature seeds is a common mistake.

Fleshy fruit usually turn from green to a color, like red, yellow or black, when mature. For instance, cucumbers turn yellow when the seeds are mature. Cut open the mature fruit, remove the seeds, clean off any pulp, dry the seeds thoroughly and store them until ready to plant. Seeds are easy to identify in fleshy fruit.

For plants that produce seeds in pods, such as beans, peas, okra, butterfly weed and many others, you must allow the pods to stay on the plant until they turn yellow or brown. But you must harvest the pods before they split open and release the seeds.

The most difficult plants to harvest seeds from are those that produce seed heads, such as marigolds, zinnias, black-eyed Susans and coneflowers. The seed head must be mature before you cut it to harvest the seeds. Allow the head to turn mostly brown and dry before harvest. Then tear the head apart over a piece of paper to remove the seeds. It helps to know what they look like, but if you can't distinguish the seeds, save everything that looks like it might be seeds.

Although there are a few instances where you could plant harvested seeds right away, most of the seeds you harvest now and over the next several weeks should be stored and planted next spring or summer. To retain maximum viability, the storage conditions must be cool and dry.

When storing seeds, make sure the seeds are very dry. Put the seeds in a labeled envelope. Place a tablespoon or two of a desiccant, such as silica gel or powdered milk, in the bottom of a sealable container. Put the envelope into the container and tightly seal with the lid. To keep the seeds cool, place the container in your refrigerator. Most seeds stored this way will stay viable for a year or more.

