

Seed Saving Techniques

This module is designed to be a basic introduction to seed saving for a range of common food plants. It should help you to grow good quality pure seed that will grow true to type for year after year.

Seed saving is easy; people have done it for thousands of years, in the process breeding all of the wonderful vegetables that we eat today.

Only in the last century has it been taken over by professionals.

With a little care we can grow better seed than you could ever buy; ideal for your own conditions, with better germination, growing stronger, healthier plants.

Broad Beans are self-fertile and insect pollinated.

Broad Bean pollen is transferred by insects working the flowers, but the plants will also self pollinate, so if you can exclude insects at flowering time your seed crop will be pure.

Theoretically you should aim for at least half a mile between varieties. In practice, in a built up area, fences, trees and houses will all reduce insect flight. This means you should have minimal crossing even with beans much closer than half a mile so long as none of your immediate neighbours are growing different varieties of bean. In an open situation like an allotment, you can physically isolate plants, by covering with fleece, for example.

The simplest method, if you are growing a relatively large number of beans and you are not concerned about achieving 100% purity, is to mark and save seed from several plants in the middle of a block of beans. Insects are relatively unlikely to come from a neighbouring patch straight to the middle of the patch, tending to work the outside flowers first. So by the time they reach your seed beans, the amount of 'foreign' pollen remaining should be small.

Always keep seed of strong, healthy plants and get rid of any that are not typical of the variety ideally before they flower. Let your seed beans mature and dry on the bush. The pods will turn dark brown, dry & wrinkled. Then pick and shell them out. Check that they are really dry by biting on them. If your teeth leave a dent, dry them further in a warm (not hot) place with a good flow of air. Broad bean seeds should keep for several years, so there is no need to grow plants for seed every year.



Peas are self pollinating

Peas are almost entirely self pollinating, only very occasionally crossing with other plants.

To grow for seed, set aside a section of a row that is entirely for seed production, and make sure you sow at a time that will avoid pea moth. Pea moth is a small, grey-brown moth whose caterpillars feed in the pods of garden peas. Peas sown early or late and which flower outside of the egg laying period of the moth (June and July) should remain un-infested.

If growing different varieties of peas, in order to avoid physical mixing up of the seeds, separate different varieties of pea with another crop. Check the row from time to time as the peas grow and pull up any plants that are weak or not true to type.

Let the peas mature until the pods are brown and the seeds start to rattle. If the weather is very bad, pull up the whole plants and bring inside (for example hung upside down from the shed roof).

Once the pods are dry, shell the peas out.

Dry the shelled peas further in a warm (but not hot) place, label with the variety and date, and store.

French Beans are self pollinating

French beans are self-pollinating, mostly pollinating before the flowers open, but they can be crossed by insects with other varieties of French bean growing nearby.

The extent of crossing varies by area. If you are just saving seed for your own use, grow your seed crop of beans at least six feet away from any other variety (12 feet if possible), and you are unlikely to have a significant problem with crossing.

To collect the seeds, allow the pods to mature fully on the plant until they start to yellow and dry out. In wet weather, collect the pods individually as they get to this stage. Then spread out somewhere out of the rain with a good airflow until the pods are fully dry and brittle.

Once they are dry, shell out the beans and dry further out of the pods. The beans should be dry enough that they break when you bite on them, rather than leaving a dent. Store in an airtight container.

If they are well dried, and stored in a cool dark place, the beans will last around three years.

Runner Beans are insect pollinated

Runner bean flowers need to be 'tripped' by wind or insects before the beans set, and are much more likely to cross with other varieties grown nearby than are French beans.

Ideally, to be sure that no crossing takes place, seed crops of runner bean should be at least 1/2 a mile away from any other varieties of runner bean. In practice, buildings, trees, and other barriers will limit insect flight patterns, so if you are gardening in a built up area, you are unlikely to have problems with crossing unless your immediate neighbours are also growing runner beans.

On an open site such as an allotment, you may need to cover the crop or to persuade your neighbours to grow the same type of runner.

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Aubergines are self-pollinated

Aubergine flowers are mainly self pollinated, but can be crossed by insects. So if you are planning to save seed, you should only grow one variety. Aim to grow six to eight plants each year to maintain a variety long term. If growing outside, you need 50 feet between your seed plants and any other aubergines. In Scotland aubergines are grown in a greenhouse or polytunnel, so you should grow just one variety at a time.

To get ripe seeds let the fruits mature well past eating stage. Purple/black crops turn a muddy purple-brown colour, green/white ones turn yellowish. Mark one or two early good fruits on each plant to leave for seed, and you can still pick and eat the later fruits.

To remove the seed, cut into quarters lengthwise, avoiding the core, and pull apart. Put the quarters into a bowl of tepid water, and rub the seeds out with your fingers. Add more water, stir thoroughly, & wait a few minutes. Good seeds will sink to the bottom, leaving debris and poor quality seeds on the surface. Pour the debris off gently through a sieve, then refill with water and repeat a couple more times. Eventually you will be left with good seeds in plain water.

Empty into a clean sieve, shake to remove as much water as possible, and then tip on to a plate and spread out well. Put to dry somewhere warm but not hot, and mix occasionally to make sure that they dry evenly and don't stick together.

Aubergine seeds will keep up to seven years if dried thoroughly & stored in a cool dark place.



Peppers and Chillies are self-pollinated

Sweet peppers and chillies are both members of the same species. Pepper flowers are self pollinating, and will set fruit without any insect activity. However, they will also cross readily, and sweet peppers will happily cross with chillies.

You need to isolate plants by around 50 metres from any other peppers or chillies growing nearby. Even if you are only growing one variety be careful about other varieties growing in adjacent gardens or allotments.

If you want to grow several varieties, or if your near neighbours are also growing peppers, you could consider making an isolation cage to cover three or four plants (see later for instructions).

To save the seed, take peppers on your isolated plants which have ripened fully to their final colour (usually yellow or red). Cut the peppers open carefully, and rub the seeds gently off of the 'core' onto a plate. Wear rubber gloves to deseed chillies, as the chilli oil sticks to your fingers and is very hard to wash off.

Dry the seeds in a warm but not hot place until they snap rather than bending.

Tomatoes are self-pollinated

Most modern varieties of tomato are self pollinating, and will not cross. The anthers on tomato flowers (which make the pollen) are fused together to make a tight cone that insects cannot enter. Usually the stigma (the receptive surface for receiving pollen) is very short, and so is located deep inside this cone of anthers. No insects can get to it and the only pollen that can fertilise it comes from the surrounding cone of anthers.

To collect the seed, allow your tomatoes to ripen fully. Then collect a few of each variety that you want to save seed from. Slice them in half across the middle of the fruit, and squeeze the seeds and juice into a jar. You then need to ferment this mixture for a few days – this removes the jelly-like coating on each seed, and also kills off many diseases that can be carried on the seeds. To do this put the jar of seeds and juice in a reasonably warm place for three days, stirring the mixture twice a day. It should develop a coating of mould, and start to smell really nasty!

After three days, add plenty of water to the jar, and stir well. The good seeds should sink to the bottom of the jar. Gently pour off the top layer of mould and any seeds that float. Then empty the good seeds into a sieve and wash them thoroughly under running water. Shake off as much water as possible, and tip the sieve out onto a china or glass plate (the seeds tend to stick to anything else). Dry somewhere warm but not too hot, and out of direct sunlight. Once they are completely dry, rub them off the plate and store in a cool dry place, where they should keep well for at least four years.

Beetroot are wind pollinated

Beetroot, leaf beet/perpetual spinach, swiss chard & sugar beet are all members of the same family and will readily cross with one another. Since the flowers are wind pollinated, crossing can take place with any other flowering beet plants within around two miles!

However, most people do not grow beets for seed and their plants will be harvested as food in the first year of growth. Since beets are biennial, (flower in their second year) even if beets are being grown close by, they will be harvested before flowering so not able to cross-pollinate your plants.

Plant beets being grown for seed closely together in a square. At the end of year one, chard and leaf beet can be overwintered in situ. Select a minimum of six to eight plants to leave for seed. Beetroot can also be overwintered in situ, or can be harvested in autumn, the best plants selected & stored then replanted in spring.

At the end of the second year, when the plants have flowered and set seed, take seed from the central plants in the block; you will find that the amount of 'contamination' is minimal providing there aren't large numbers of other flowering beets right next door.

Beetroot continued ..

If you are aiming to keep a variety true to type you need to isolate it, usually by physically covering your seed plants.

To do this, plant at least six plants very close together in a circle, with a wooden stake in the middle. As the seed stalks form, growing up to four feet tall, tie them together, supported by the stake. Then as they develop cover the group of flower heads with either a shiny paper bag that will withstand rain, or a bag made out of agricultural fleece.

Shake the bag from time to time to make sure that pollen is distributed within the bag.

As the large, prickly seeds mature, keep an eye on them, and start to harvest as they turn brown and start to dry out. You can either cut entire seed stalks, or harvest mature seeds by rubbing them into a bucket.

Make sure that the seeds are thoroughly dry before storage, and they should last at least five years.

For Perpetual Spinach and Swiss Chard follow the guidelines for Beetroot

Carrots are insect pollinated

Carrots flower in their second year of growth. In areas with mild winters, leave in the ground, mulching heavily. The foliage will die back but will then re-sprout and start to flower in the spring. In colder areas, dig up your carrots in the autumn, and select the best coloured and shaped roots. Twist off the foliage, and store the roots in a box of dry sand in a frost free place, making sure that they don't touch each other. In spring, replant the roots, and they will re-sprout and flower.

Carrots grow into big plants and need to be isolated from other flowering carrot varieties by at least 500m. They will also cross with wild carrot, giving thin white useless roots. Barriers such as houses and hedges disrupt insect flight paths so you don't necessarily need to eliminate all wild carrot but watch out for any white roots in subsequent generations and get rid of them.

To harvest your seed, remove flowerheads as they start to turn brown and dry. Dry the seed heads further inside, and then rub them between your hands or in a sieve to separate them. You will notice that the seeds have a 'beard' which is removed in commercial seed to make them easier to pack. There is no need to get the seed completely clean - just sow slightly more thickly to allow for the chaff mixed in.

Carrot seed is relatively short lived, but if it is stored somewhere cool and dry, it should give good germination for three years. **NOTE:** To maintain a carrot variety effectively, you need to save seed from at least 40 good roots to maintain genetic diversity. If you have too small a genetic pool, you will end up with small, poor quality roots in a very few generations.

Brassicas are insect pollinated

Broccoli, Cabbages, Cauliflower, Kale and Sprouts are all members of the same family (*Brassica oleraceae*), and will all cross with each other. And they are mainly self-incompatible – which means that in order to get seed, insects have to carry pollen from one plant to another to pollinate the flowers. Because of this, you can't simply grow your broccoli or cabbages for seed in an insect proof cage to avoid crossing. Only seed save from one member of the family each year and if growing other brassicas for food, don't let them flower.

Fences, etc disrupt insect flight patterns, so as long as you don't have any immediate neighbours with flowering crops in their garden, you shouldn't have crossing. Plant in a block so that bees tend to move between plants, rather than away to other flowers elsewhere. Keep at least six plants for seed.

Brassicas have a tall flower stalk covered in lots of small yellow flowers. These will then form slender seed pods, which start out green, and turn a straw colour as they mature and dry. Once they start to dry, keep a close eye on them, as they tend to shatter and drop their seed. Its best to cut entire plants once most of the pods begin to look dry, and then leave them to mature further on a sheet indoors. Once they are thoroughly dry, the seeds will come out of the pods very easily; the simplest way is to trample the plants on top of a large sheet, and then sieve out the debris.

You should get lots of seed from even a few plants. The seed will keep well for up to five years so long as it is stored somewhere cool and dry.

Lettuce are insect pollinated

Lettuce flowers are self pollinating, and very rarely cross. If you plan to save seed from more than one variety of lettuce, separate them by around 12 foot or plant a tall crop in between the rows.

Select two or three good lettuces from your row, and mark them for seed. **Do not** save seed from any plants that bolt early, as you want to select for lettuces that stand well. Heading lettuces may need a little help for the flowering stalk to emerge; slitting the heads partially open with a knife works well.

Once the lettuces have flowered, the seeds will ripen gradually. Harvest seed daily to get the maximum yield, shaking into a bag. Or wait until a reasonable number of seeds are ready and then cut the whole plant. Put it head first into a bucket, shaking and rubbing to remove the seeds. If you leave the whole cut plant upside down in the bucket somewhere dry, slightly immature seeds will continue to ripen over the next few days.

Most of what you have collected in the bucket will be white 'feathers' and chaff. To sort the seed, shake it gently in a kitchen sieve. Some seeds will fall through the sieve, with the rest collecting in the bottom. The feathers and chaff will rise to the top, and you can pick them off. There's no need to get the seed completely clean; a little chaff stored and planted along with the seeds won't cause any harm.

If the seed feels a little damp, dry it further on a plate before labelling and storing. Lettuce seed should keep for around three years, provided it is kept cool and dry.



Pumpkins, Courgettes and Squash are best hand pollinated

Pumpkins, squashes, marrows & courgettes will all cross readily with each other. The best (usually only) way to save pure seed on a home scale is to hand pollinate one or more fruits.

Plants have two different types of flower, male and female. Only female flowers will grow into gourds. Female flowers have small immature fruit beneath the flower. Male flowers just have a straight stem. You need to transfer pollen from a male flower into a female flower, making sure that no pollen gets introduced from plants of a different variety.

There are detailed instructions later in these instructions

Allow the fruit to develop, then harvest and keep in a cool dry place for another month or so to ripen further. Then cut the fruit in half, and scoop out the seeds, leaving the rest of the fruit for cooking as normal.

Wash the seed in a colander, rubbing it between your hands to get rid of the fibres, and then shake off as much water as possible. Spread the seed out on a plate to dry. Seeds need to dry as quickly as possible, but without getting too hot, for example, dry on a sunny windowsill.

To test whether the seeds are dry enough, try bending one in half. If it is dry, it will snap rather than bending.

Cucumbers are insect pollinated

Cucumbers will cross with any other cucumbers or gherkins nearby. You need around a quarter mile isolation to make sure that your plants won't cross.

It is possible, although fiddly, to hand pollinate cucumbers. Grow plants under a fleece tunnel to exclude insects, and then hand pollinate the flowers on those plants with a paintbrush. Make sure that you exchange pollen between different plants to keep the diversity of your variety.

Cucumbers need to be ripened well beyond the edible stage. They will become much fatter, and green varieties will turn a dark yellow brownish colour, white varieties a paler yellow. Keep for a week or so after picking to let the seeds mature fully.

Scoop out the seeds and surrounding pulp into a jam jar, add a little water and stir well. Leave the jar on a sunny windowsill for 2-3 days for the seeds to ferment. On the third day, fill the jar fully with water, and stir well again. The good seeds should sink to the bottom of the jar, leaving pulp, debris and empty seeds floating on top. Gently pour off the water and debris, refill the jar, and repeat. After a couple of rinses, you should be left with good seeds at the bottom of a jar in clean water. Drain off the water, and spread out on a plate to dry well.

Cucumber seeds will last for several years if dried well and stored somewhere cool.



Basil is insect pollinated

Basil flowers are insect pollinated, and different varieties flowering within around 150 feet of one another may cross.

If you want to grow several types of basil, just keep picking the flower stalks off of all the varieties apart from the one that you want to grow for seed.

Once several flower spikes have set and the flowers have started to wither, mark those spikes for saving seed from, and you can then allow the other varieties to flower. The seeds are ready to collect when the spikes turn brown and dry out.

Don't worry about the seeds dropping out – they are well attached, and actually need quite a lot of rubbing to free from the dead flower heads.



Coriander and Dill are insect pollinated

With both coriander & dill, to get the best seed for sowing in future years, pull up and discard the earliest plants to bolt, and only save seed from those plants that produce plenty of leaf and flower late.

It is best to plan to save seed from early summer sowings, to allow plenty of time for the seed to mature and dry on the plant. Harvest as soon as the seed is brown and dry, as it does tend to drop from the seed heads.

Rub the heads together in your hands over a bucket to free the seed.

Dill seed usually comes cleanly away from the seed heads.

Coriander seed tends to contain more chaff, but you can winnow it by pouring gently from one bucket to another in a light breeze if you want to clean it for kitchen use.

Parsley is insect pollinated

Flat and curly leaved varieties of parsley will cross.

The flowers are insect pollinated, so you should only grow one type for seed at a time.

To save parsley seed, overwinter at least two or three plants.

In warmer areas mulch heavily with straw or cover plants with a frame, elsewhere grow a few plants in a polytunnel or greenhouse.

The next spring, the plants will start to flower and produce seed.

Harvest the seeds from individual flowerheads as they dry and turn brown, as they tend to drop from the plant when ready.

Melons are insect pollinated

All varieties of melon will cross. Ideally, you need around a quarter of a mile between different varieties. If your melons are in a greenhouse or tunnel, you can probably get away with a somewhat smaller distance, particularly if there are hedges, houses or other tall barriers in between your melons and the neighbouring crop.

It is possible, although fiddly, to hand pollinate melons. Grow plants under a fleece tunnel to exclude insects, and then hand pollinate the flowers on those plants with a paintbrush. Make sure that you exchange pollen between different plants to keep the diversity of your variety.

To harvest melon seed, pick the melons when they are ripe and ready for eating and keep indoors for a further day or two for the seed to mature further. Then open the fruit, scoop the seed out, and wash in a sieve under running water. Spread out on a china plate to dry thoroughly.

Melon seeds will last for several years if dried well and stored somewhere cool.

Hand-pollinating Squash, Pumpkin, Courgette and Marrow

One evening, when the plants are just beginning to produce flowers, find some male and female flowers that are going to open the next day. Buds that are just ready to open are much fatter than the others, and they have turned from green to yellow.

You need to stop these flowers opening, so that insects can't get into them. The easiest way to do this is to gently slip a thin rubber band over the end of the petals, to hold them shut.

The next morning go back to the plants. Pick a male flower, take off its rubber band, and tear off the petals. Gently take the rubber band from one of your female flowers. Using the male flower like a brush, rub the pollen on to each section of the stigma in the centre of the female flower. Then carefully rubber band the female flower shut again so that no insects can get in with more, 'foreign', pollen.

Tie a piece of wool loosely around the stem of the female flower, so that at harvest time, you know which pumpkins you have hand pollinated.

Now leave the fruit to develop and ripen.

Making an isolation cage

To make a simple isolation cage for peppers or aubergines, you need some cheap nylon flyscreen five times as long as it is wide, four canes or thin stakes, and some string and garden wire. AS an alternative to flyscreen, you can use old net curtains, or other netting small enough to exclude insects. A piece of screen 1m by 5m will give a cage large enough to cover three or four plants.

Cut a square piece of screen 1m x 1m to make the top of the cage, and then fold the remaining strip of flyscreen round and sew its ends together. The resulting band will be the sides of the cage. Then sew the top to the sides, making a cube of flyscreen with the bottom missing.

To put up the cage over your plants, hammer the four canes into the ground in a square a little smaller than the cage top, so that they stick up a little less than the height of the cage. Twist a short piece of wire tightly round the top of each cane, and then run string in a square around the tops of the canes, supported by the wires to stop it slipping. Run a second piece of string around the stakes lower down to stop the sides of the cage blowing in against the plants.

- Then slip the cage over your plants, and weigh it down with earth or rocks.



Happy Seed Saving!

If you have enjoyed reading about seed saving, why not join a SEED-CIRCLE and share your interest, enthusiasm, and of course seeds, with others in your area

Contact robin@abundantborders.org.uk

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Realseeds.co.uk

The website has lots of great information on how to grow, save and store seeds. They also sell seed to get started! We owe them special thanks for allowing us to use a lot of their information in these pages.

Back Garden Seed Saving – Sue Stickland

A fascinating book with lots of detail about saving seeds and it has easy to follow crop-by-crop guidelines.

Abundant Borders

There is lots of great information on our website at abundantborders.org.uk
We are happy to answer your questions through our Facebook Group
(<https://www.facebook.com/groups/virtualcommunitygarden/>)

Videos

A great selection of videos from DIY seeds
(<https://www.diyseeds.org/en/films/>)

