



Saving Seeds. Saving Memories.

By Tammy Borden ©

My first experience with saving seeds began with a beautiful hyacinth bean vine that I planted from seed during my classes to become a Master Gardener Volunteer. I can still recall our entire class lined up with Styrofoam cups and starting mix while the class teachers rationed out the seeds, eager to be an agent in allowing life to come into existence. Even the seeds looked intriguing with their matte black surface and white edging.

Within days, they sprouted and it wasn't long before they overtook a small trellis. The seedpods eventually appeared following the delicate flowers, and it was easy to simply collect the encased seeds and store them until spring. When spring finally came, it brought so much gratification to know I was a part of continuing the cycle of life as the seeds from one plant soon became several dozen more that I could share with family and friends.

Saving seeds, in general, is not too difficult, and it can save you a lot of money. Here are a few basics that need to be followed for most varieties, whether they're a vegetable or flower.

STEP ONE

In general, select seeds from heirloom variety flowers and vegetables. As a rule of thumb, do not waste your time trying to save seeds from hybrid plants or exotic species. The offspring will most likely look nothing like the parent plant, be weak, or may not sprout at all. My mother told me how she painfully came to realize this rule when she saved seeds from a hybrid cucumber... the following spring she planted the seeds; they sprouted, grew vigorously and had promising blossoms. But when the fruit began to set, every single tiny cucumber shriveled and fell off the vine, leaving her to resort to roadside stands and tasteless produce aisles.

STEP TWO

Once you've selected the plants you would like to save seeds from, allow the flower or fruit to mature on the vine so the seeds can fully develop. Choose from the healthiest and finest produce or flower heads. For most peppers, allow them to go beyond the green stage until they're red. For cucumbers, allow them to get over ripe and turn yellow on the vine. For flowers, herbs and vegetables that set seed (lettuce, radish, etc.), let them get to that unsightly brown stage or allow them to set seed pods.

STEP THREE

Harvest the seeds. For fruits and vegetables, like melons, it can be as easy as slicing them open and scooping out the seeds. For flowers, like zinnias, pull the seeds from the center cone that forms. For others like nicotiana (flowering tobacco), hold the seed pod inside an envelope and burst it so the thousands of miniscule seeds fall inside. After harvesting the seed, allow them to fully dry out of direct sunlight on a paper plate.

STEP FOUR

Fermenting... Huh? Fermenting is not required for most seeds. However, if you want to save seeds from that mystery tomato that your uncle's been growing for years, you'll need to read this part! Tomatoes require an extra step that will bring back memories of growing cultures in Petri dishes in your high school biology class. Tomato seeds are enclosed in a gel-like substance containing growth inhibitors that needs to be removed through a fermentation process. Remove the seeds and place them in a glass dish. Add a small amount of water to help separate the seeds from the pulp. Then set the bowl of tomato seeds and pulp in a warm spot and allow 2-4 days for the fermentation to take place. As with most fermentation processes, don't be alarmed if the slimy mixture develops an odor. Wait for a layer of mold to form on top of your seeds & pulp, and for the seeds to fall to the bottom. Finally, remove the mold and rinse the seeds well in a strainer, removing any remaining pulp. Spread the seeds onto a paper plate or glass dish to dry.

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STEP FIVE

Storage should take place in a cool, dry, dark place where temperatures remain fairly stable. Glass jars work well, as do paper envelopes. Make sure that seeds being kept in sealed containers are completely dry so that moisture doesn't cause molding. Clearly label your containers with the variety name and date.

STEP SIX

Some seeds require cold stratification to germinate. Most hardy perennials fall into this category. Baptisia and milkweed are two examples. Cold stratification simulates a winter freezing period and can easily be accomplished by placing these seeds in the freezer for a couple months. Research on-line or use a good reference book to determine if your seed needs this cold treatment.

Saving seeds is fun and easy. There are many seeds that may require a slightly different method for harvesting, so I suggest searching on-line for your particular variety. Or you can purchase a book to help you sort through it. *"Seed to Seed"* by Suzanne Ashworth, available through Seed Savers Exchange, is one suggestion. Happy harvesting!