

The Seed Library

A Seed-Lending Program at the Round Valley Public Library

Easy Seeds for Beginning Seed Savers

Welcome to the world of seed saving! By learning to save your own seed you are preserving heirloom varieties and protecting biodiversity in our food crops. You are also helping us all take a step toward community resilience and self-reliance.

Make sure you are starting with seeds or seedlings from an open-pollinated variety of plant. Open-pollinated varieties breed true; they produce fruit just like their parents. When you plant open-pollinated varieties and respect isolation distances, you can raise generation after generation of your favorite foods.

Hybrid seed is different from open-pollinated seed. Hybrid seed is the offspring of two different varieties. Seeds collected from hybrid plants will not produce plants and fruit like their parents. While you can grow hybrid varieties with wonderful results in your garden, keep them separate from your open-pollinated plants. Respect isolation distances. ***Do not collect seed for The Seed Library from hybrid varieties.***

Because tomato, bean, pea, and lettuce plants are mostly self-pollinated, they are the easiest of plants to grow for seed and an excellent place to begin your seed-saving adventure.

Tomato Seed

Tomato seeds are easy to save, because most varieties of tomato self-pollinate and only need to be separated from other tomato varieties by 10 to 30 feet. The exceptions are potato leaf and cherry varieties, which should be separated from other tomato varieties by 150 feet.

Tomato seeds are ready for harvest when the fruits are ripe for eating.

1. Cut the tomato in half (along the “equator”).
2. Scoop or squeeze the seeds into a container.
3. Add a bit of water to the container (not too much, just enough to dilute it a little). Allow this mixture to ferment 1 to 3 days at as close to 70° as possible.
4. Stir the mixture daily for 1 to 3 days, until the majority of seeds sink to the bottom of the container.
5. Pour off the floating seeds, pulp, and any mold. Pour the good seeds (the ones that sank) into a strainer and rinse well.
6. Pat off as much of the water as you can and spread the seeds out to dry in a warm place with good airflow. They will stick to paper towels, so dry them on a coffee filter or plate.

Tomato seeds are dry enough for storage when they break rather than bend under stress.

Tomato seeds have a relatively long storage life and can live for 5 years or more under cool, dry conditions.

Bean and Pea Seed

Common beans and peas are self-pollinating annuals and varieties will rarely cross. Keeping bean varieties separated from each other by 20 feet and keeping pea varieties separated by 50 feet should maintain varietal purity.

Pods should be left on the vine until they are brown and crisp.

1. Pick the pods from the plant when the seeds inside are extremely hard.
2. Split the pods by hand, or fill a pillowcase with seedpods, tie the opening shut, and jog in place on top of it to remove seeds.
3. Winnowing can be used to separate seed from chaff. Pour the seed/chaff from one basket to another, letting the wind blow away the chaff.
4. Dry the seeds on a screen until they can pass the “shatter test.” Put a seed on a hard surface and strike it with a hammer. If it shatters rather than squishes, it is ready to store.

Bean and pea seeds can live for 4 to 5 years when stored under cool, dry conditions.

Lettuce Seed

Lettuce is a self-pollinating annual. Varieties rarely cross. An isolation distance of 25 feet between lettuce varieties should be sufficient to maintain varietal purity.

Lettuce seeds are ready to begin harvesting 2 to 3 weeks after the plant has flowered.

1. Leave plants in the ground and harvest seeds over a few days by shaking the seed heads into a paper bag.
2. To clean the seeds, use a fine mesh screen that will allow seeds to pass through but will restrict the white “feathers” and larger chaff.
3. Seeds are dry enough for storage when they break rather than bend under stress.

Lettuce seeds can live for 3 years when stored under cool, dry conditions.

Seed harvesting techniques taken from Seed Savers Exchange’s webinar “Basic Seed Saving for Beginners.”