

This information is from

*The Seed Library & Seed-Lending Program at the
Round Valley Public Library*

23925 Howard Street, PO Box 620, Covelo, CA 95428 • www.mendolibrary.org

Saving & Sharing Seed

The Seed Library is a free program committed to increasing our ability to feed ourselves wholesome food. We offer seeds and education. Through the time-honored tradition of seed saving we celebrate biodiversity, nurture locally adapted, organically grown plant varieties, and foster community resilience, self-reliance, and a culture of sharing.

The seeds you borrow from The Seed Library are free, and yet they are priceless. We hope you learn a lot as you experience the joys of gardening and seed saving. As you learn and experience success in your garden, please plan to return some seeds to share the fruits of your labors with The Seed Library community.

Choosing Seeds

The seeds that you will find in our library are from open-pollinated or heirloom varieties, meaning when the seeds of successive generations are planted, they will reliably produce plants just like their parents. Our seeds are categorized by how difficult they are to save, not to grow. Please feel free to try growing any seeds that interest you. When growing to save seed, please try to match the seed-saving difficulty with your gardening expertise. If you are a beginning seed saver, we ask that you save and return seeds from the easy seed category the first year.

Guidelines for Growing Plants to Save Seed

EASY SEEDS are great for beginners. They grow plants that are less likely to cross-pollinate. Easy seeds are marked with a green label. Examples of easy seeds include bean, pea, lettuce, and tomato. Tip: Stick with a single variety of these plants, or separate different varieties with a taller buffer crop or distance.

MEDIUM SEEDS grow plants that may be insect pollinated and are more likely to cross-pollinate. Medium seeds are marked with a yellow label. Examples of medium seeds include basil, eggplant, and pepper. Tip: Choose only one variety from each plant or separate similar plants a good distance apart, such as in the front and back yards.

ADVANCED SEEDS grow plants that are insect or wind pollinated and are very likely to cross-pollinate with other plant varieties and produce seeds that will grow into a “mystery” plant. They may also be biennial. Advanced seeds are marked with a red label. Examples of advanced seeds include Brassica crops (cabbage, broccoli, and kale), cucumber, melon, and squash. Tip: Stick to a single plant variety within the species, stagger growing times, and use tenting or hand-pollination techniques to preserve the purity of the seed. It’s also very important to check the botanical name to determine which plants are related and susceptible to cross-pollination.

Three Ways to Save Seed

At harvest time, please take some extra steps to save seeds for others to borrow and plant. By returning a portion of the seeds you save from your strongest, tastiest, and most vigorous plants, you’ll help keep our seed library growing.

DRY SEED PROCESSING - For plants with seeds that grow in pods or on the outside of the plant. (Examples include bean, onion, and carrot.) **Tip:** Collect dry seeds under dry, warm conditions to prevent mold and to reduce drying time.

1. Allow the seeds to dry on the plant and collect the seedpods before they break open.
2. For plants with seeds that develop in the center of the flower, allow the plant to dry.
3. When the stem holding the seed head turns brown, harvest the seeds.

WET SEED PROCESSING - For seeds that grow inside the fleshy fruit of the plant. (Examples include eggplant, watermelon, and some squash.)

1. Rinse off the seeds and dry them thoroughly.
2. If the seeds have a gel-like coating, use the fermentation process. Tip: If you’re not sure whether your seeds have a coating, float them in a small amount of water. You’ll be able to see the coating in the water.

FERMENTATION SEED PROCESSING - For seeds with a gel-like coating. (Examples include tomato, cucumber, some squash, and some melon.)

1. Mix the seeds and the seed juice with a little water in a small plastic or glass container with a lid.
2. Allow the seeds to ferment for 4 to 6 days.
3. When a layer of mold has formed on top of the water and the seeds sink, the fermentation is complete. Add more water, swish it around, and remove the mold and pulp. The good seeds will sink to the bottom, while the bad seeds will float to the top. Remove the bad seeds.
4. Drain the water from the seeds and set them out on a plate, screen, or piece of glass to dry thoroughly. Once the seeds are completely dry, place them in a moisture-proof container. Label and store the seeds.

Words to Know

OPEN-POLLINATED OR HEIRLOOM SEED - Varieties that have been grown for so many successive generations that their physical and genetic qualities are fairly stable. This seed will be “true to type” if correctly saved.

HYBRID SEED - When cross-pollination occurs between plant varieties. Seed saved from plants grown from hybrid seed will not produce plants like the parent plant.

POLLINATION - The transfer of pollen from male to female reproductive organs to produce fruit and seed.

CROSS-POLLINATION - The transfer of pollen from one plant to the female flower of another plant. When cross-pollination occurs between varieties it can cause unpredictable results in the fruit and seed.

BIENNIAL - A flowering plant that takes two years to produce seed.

FERMENTATION - A process that mimics natural chemical reactions by allowing seed to break down organic barriers and prepare for germination. The fermentation process breaks down germination inhibitors and protects against certain diseases.

A commitment to growing plants for seed is a gift to yourself and your family.

The seeds you save, and return are a gift to your community.

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.

1. Tomato seeds are ready for harvest when the fruits are ripe for eating.
2. Cut the tomato in half (along the “equator”).
3. Scoop or squeeze the seeds into a container.
4. 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.
5. Stir the mixture daily for 1 to 3 days, until most seeds sink to the bottom of the container.
6. Pour off the floating seeds, pulp, and any mold. Pour the good seeds (the ones that sank) into a strainer and rinse well.
7. 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.

1. Pods should be left on the vine until they are brown and crisp.
2. Pick the pods from the plant when the seeds inside are extremely hard.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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.”*