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## Saving Seeds

An increasing number of gardeners are saving their own seeds. This is enjoyable and fascinating. It allows you to continue growing varieties that are difficult to find in catalogs. Seed saving is somewhat involved and procedures vary among types of vegetables, so this is just a short introduction to this subject. If this interests you, I suggest reading more about it and also talking with others who save seeds. Some helpful references are: *Seed Sowing and Saving* by Carole Turner, published by Storey Books, and *Seed to Seed*, published by Seed Savers Exchange, 3076 North Winn Road, Decorah, IA 52101. We will cover a few of the basics here.

Successful seed saving requires that you work with open pollinated varieties rather than hybrids. Hybrids have desirable characteristics, but they do not stay true to variety if you save their seeds. You must cross pollinate using the original parents to produce hybrid seed. Open pollinated varieties produce seed that is true to variety if there is no cross-pollination from other varieties of the same vegetable. Keep in mind that closely related vegetables such as squash and pumpkin or many of the brassicas (cabbage family) will cross-pollinate. Cross-pollination can be prevented by isolation or covering flowers. However, you may want to try your hand at plant breeding and do some crossing.

Save seed only from plants that appear to be true to variety and have desirable characteristics. Avoid saving seed from diseased plants in most cases. Many viruses and bacterial and some fungal diseases can be present on seed and will be transmitted to future crops. Some seed-borne diseases can be controlled with a hot water seed treatment. This requires very exacting conditions and procedures and is not suggested for the beginner.

Most vegetables are annuals, producing seed in one year. These are good ones to start with. Biennial vegetables require two growing seasons to produce seed and require a bit more effort. Examples of biennials are beets and cabbage. Beet roots and cabbage heads can be pulled up in the late fall before the ground freezes, stored at cold temperatures and replanted in the spring. The second year, they will produce seeds which you can harvest and save for the following year. For details on these and other biennials, see one of the references.

Some seeds such as corn or beans should mature on the plant, be allowed to dry and then stored for the winter. Pumpkin and squash seed can be scooped from the seed cavity at the time the fruit is being prepared for cooking or carving. Seed vigor improves if the fruit is stored a month or two. The pulp should be rinsed off and the seed dried for a few weeks. Cull out flat seeds which are not viable. Tomato seed and pulp can be scooped from the fruit and placed in a bowl of water for a few days. Pulp and non-viable seeds will rise to the top and can be poured off each day. The viable seeds will sink to the bottom. After the pulp and the good seeds have been separated, spread the seeds to dry for about two weeks, after which they can be stored until next year.

Seed should be stored in a cool place such as a refrigerator. They must be well dried and kept in a dry, sealed container. The embryo's (future plant's) metabolism slows down under dry, cold

conditions. This slows the use of the endosperm (the seed's food supply) and thus extends the life of the seed.

This is but a very brief overview of seed saving. Perhaps it will tantalize you enough to investigate further and expand into this fascinating area.

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