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Features

Here's how to save seeds from your garden

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Whether you obtain seeds from the display rack at your favorite garden store, by perusing seed catalogs in either printed or electronic versions, or from friends and relatives, you may one day have a need to save seeds from your very own garden.

Vegetable crops can be divided into three general categories that indicate the ease or difficulty of saving seeds: self-pollinated, cross-pollinated and hybrids.

Self-pollinated crops -- beans, peas, lettuce, non-hybrid tomatoes, eggplant and peppers -- are those that reproduce like copies of themselves from one generation to the next and are the easiest to save. These include heirloom varieties of these crops.

The cross-pollinated crops, corn, cucumbers and squashes are crops that requiring the services of the wind or bees and other pollinator. These are more difficulties for self saving of seeds, but can be accomplished by the avid gardener.

Hybrid varieties are produced by highly controlled selection and mating of maternal (seed) and paternal (pollen) parents. Development of hybrid varieties should be left to the professional and amateur plant breeders due to the complexity of the process.

Seeds are the result of plant maturation, flowering, pollination and seed development.

Time occupied by the crop in the garden can double or triple as a result of waiting for seed maturity. Seeds should only be collected from fully matured fruits, pods and flower heads.

A general guideline for when seeds are matured in fruits is to watch for when the fruits lose their shine and become dull or change color from green to red or yellow. Pods and flower heads should be dry and seeds easily separating from pod or flower head.

The best seeds will come from the best plants.

Select seeds from plants with little or no disease and few insect pests. You do not want to handicap your garden by planting disease and insect pests along with your next crop. Most importantly, don't wait for the last pod, fruit, flower head or plant to save seeds, as these normally will be the smallest in size and limit your selection choices.

Separating and cleaning seeds can be done by the dry processing or wet processing method depending on plant species. The dry method is normally used for seeds from pods and flower heads that dry completely. Crop examples are beans, peas, lettuce, corn, most flowers and herbs. Pods or flower heads can be broken apart and the chaff can be sieved or gently blown away. Seeds can be stored immediately. Seeds from fleshy fruits are normally processed by the wet method.

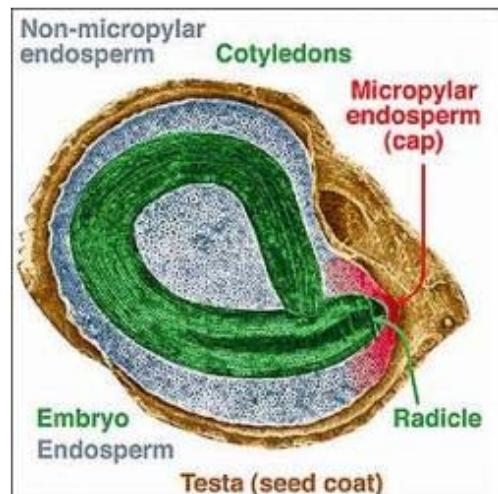
Seeds of cucumber, eggplant, melons, tomato and squashes are normally processed through this method. Seeds are first scraped, crushed, cut or squeezed out of the fruit. Crops like eggplant can be peeled and seed bearing tissue diced. Place seed bearing tissue into a jar or bowl and cover to prevent drying and store away from direct sunlight or heat sources. You can moisten the seed mixture sparingly if it is too dry. Use caution when moistening seeds, as too much tap water will stimulate seeds to germinate. Liquid accumulating from the fermenting mixture is okay.

Allow seed mass to ferment for several days with daily mixing.

When seeds are free of pulp, gel and other fruit tissue, the seeds are ready to be washed.

The fermenting process should be complete within seven days. Add water to fermented mixture and stir to loosen seeds from fermented fruit tissue. Good seeds will normally sink to the bottom, while bad seeds will float and can be poured off with other debris. Rinse several more times to eliminate all fruit debris. Blot excessive water from seeds using a clean cloth or paper towels. Spread seeds out to allow for quick uniform drying. Do not place seeds in direct sunlight, as they can overheat and die.

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This drawing shows a mature seed of Capsicum annum, or pepper, by Katrin Hermann based on an electromagnetic image by Watkins and Cantliffe. - Gerhard Leubner, Lab University, Freiburg, Germany

After seeds have dried for a day or more, select a suitable storage container for your seeds. Recycled mailing envelopes or coin envelopes make good containers for storage. It is very important to properly label your packet with the name of the crop, the varietal name, location seeds was grown and the date. Store seeds in a cool location out of direct sunlight which could over heat seeds causing them to be weaken or kill. Also, be mindful that heat and moisture is the number one killer of stored seeds, followed by insect pest.

If you want to know more, an upcoming event may be of interest. The Kohala Center is sponsoring "Hua Ka Hua -- Restore Our Seed," a Public Seed Symposium at the Keauhou Beach Resort Hotel on April 17-18.

A sampling of the topics to be covered will be seed saving and storage, farm variety trials, panel discussion on seed sustainability for Hawaii and more.

For more information on the Seed Symposium, contact the Kohala Center at <http://www.kohalacenter.org>.

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