

# Seed Saving Belongs in the Home Garden



## A. Where Have All the Seed-Savers Gone?

One of the most delightful aspects of gardening in northern New England—so much so that it almost makes up for the climate—is the great multitude of amazing gardeners one gets to meet and, more importantly, learn from. Experts abound at the seed store, the community garden, and the farmers’ market, on public radio, and for that matter, at the post office, the gas station, and the workplace. No matter where you are, if you have a gardening question, chances are there is someone who can help nearby. And so, when my wife Alicia and I finally had the fortune to have a piece of ground to call our own, we got plenty of direction on how to make and apply compost, how to keep the critters at bay, and the preferred method of canning tomatoes (the freezer is the only way!). There was no shortage of good advice from myriad gardeners that seemed to be able to produce just about anything from our cool, stony soil—except for one glaring exception. Even as the offspring of last year’s sunflowers seeds, fallen to the ground and missed by careless squirrels, surrounded the community garden in town, and tomatoes and squash sprang from every compost pile, all of the seed came from the catalogue or the corner store. People who would defiantly (and admirably!) refuse to eat a tomato not grown by themselves or a local farmer, routinely obtained their seed commercially, sometimes from thousands of miles away. Why?

The reason became blindingly clear to me one afternoon when I was attending an agricultural conference and I had the opportunity to hear experts from an agricultural extension (not from my home state of Vermont) give a talk on seed saving. The talk was excellent as they discussed the proper ways to save seed from some of the simplest plants: beans, peas, and tomatoes. As they moved on to discuss other vegetables, however, I heard a phrase that explained my entire experience with seed saving thus far. I remember it something like this: “For a lot of vegetables, if you can’t save seed from at least two hundred plants in your home garden, don’t even bother. Just buy them from a professional.” This advice to a room of folks who included homesteaders who not only grew a lot of their own food but built their own homes, cut their own firewood, and even spun their own yarn. Seeds, though, that should be left to the professionals. From this point on, I vowed to push the limits of seed saving in my own garden.

Now, a word in defense of these highly competent agriculture extension agents: they are not incorrect. Many of our favorite garden crops—cabbages, carrots, onions, leeks, and, most notoriously, corn—do much, much better in larger populations. This truth, however, is incomplete. The conclusion that we should abandon seed saving to professionals is, therefore, flawed. It assumes the goal of the home garden seed saver is exactly the same as it is for commercial growers: maximum uniformity, scale, and consistency. While we can empathize with at least some of these goals, they do not always resonate most with the home gardener. Consider the frugal homesteader who finds a hundred-dollar annual seed purchase unaffordable. What of the gardener who finds an unknown (but delicious!) tomato growing in the compost pile and wants to try to propagate it? What of the woman who grew up eating her Polish grandmother’s homemade sauerkraut and receives as her inheritance a single envelope of seed marked simply “cabbage”? Should she simply grow these seeds out while they last, enjoying her grandmother’s heirloom for a season (or two or three), and then move on to growing whatever seed is being commercially mass-produced and marketed at the corner store? Is that what she is going to leave *her* grandchildren?

If I make no other case in this book, I would like to leave you with this: seed saving does *not* belong to a small group of experts. It is not the exclusive right of professional large-scale farms. Most of all, it is not to be delegated to industry. It is *ours*. Yours and mine. It is ours by inheritance from our agrarian ancestors, who did it by necessity and—I like to think—out of love for what they were passing along to future generations. To *us*. I propose that now, by a different necessity—and with no less love for our children who follow us—we take it back!

### B. How this Book is Different

There are a number of good books on seed saving. I would not have committed the time to writing another one unless I felt sure that there was a piece missing, and that is this: a book about seed saving in the home garden—with all of its trials and difficulties—written by someone who does just that—seed saving in the home garden. While I will discuss techniques used by commercial growers, like separating various seeds by quarter of a mile or more, I will not dwell on these, and will offer alternatives to techniques that seem impractical (at best) for application in the home garden.


### C. How to Read This Book

I have set out to provide all the information you need to be successful at seed saving, while avoiding the temptation to provide so much information as to be overwhelming. I fully anticipate that some folks will want more detail in one section and less in others. To balance these needs, look for the “Keeping it Simple” summaries at the end of each section (except the shorter sections that are already pretty well simplified). If you find yourself getting cross-eyed (or impatient with my rambling), just jump to the summary. While there is a lot to say about seed saving, in the end it’s just taking



**KEEPING IT SIMPLE**

We often let ourselves be convinced that seed saving is too hard to do at home. This is untrue. Seed saving belongs in the home garden.



**KEEPING IT SIMPLE**

If the text seems complicated, see the “Keeping it Simple” summary. Or better yet, just put the book down, go out into your garden, plant some seed you saved, and learn from what happens!

a seed from your garden and keeping it safe and dry until it's time to plant. Let's try not to make it much more complicated than that!

#### D. Why Should We Save Seed

Before we jump in to *how* to save seed, it is worth noting *why* we should save seed. Not only will this keep us inspired, it will influence some of our techniques.

##### The Seeds are There

While I have precious few mountain-climbing analogies to apply to seed saving, George Mallory's famous quote that he climbed Everest "because it was there" is a good one.

Have you ever grown black or pinto beans? Well, there are your seeds. Likewise, do you routinely pick *all* of your green beans so that none of them go by and get tough (yeah, right!)? There are always a few at the end. Let them firm up a bit and, *voilà!*, there are your green bean seeds for next year.

My favorite example of this was the time I had a half a dozen kale plants live through the winter. I had a lot to do that spring, and by the time I got to that corner of the garden, they had flowered. I let them go. Do you know how many seeds six kale plants can produce? I had a mason jar's full of seed—enough for the county, I joked to myself (and given how hot Vermonters are on their kale, that is saying something!).

After my experience of accidentally saving kale seed, I did three things that transformed my seed saving practice:

1. I marveled at how much Mother Nature was willing to give me freely if I just gave her some room to work;
2. I gave kale seed to anyone who wanted it;
3. I didn't buy that variety of kale seed myself for several years (if I'd had the foresight to put some in the freezer, I'm not sure I'd ever have to buy kale seed again).

After seven or eight years, I dumped what was left of the seed in with the feed grain of some pigs we were growing through the winter. Now,

I thought that seed was too old to germinate, but given the amount of kale growing next spring all over the pig run (and not just near the trough) it apparently had plenty of life left in it. (Either than or the journey through the pig's belly woke it right up!)

If you have strong feelings about exactly *what* these seeds turn into (and in most cases you will!) there is some nuance to understand. We'll get to that. For now I make one humble suggestion: the next time your garden freely gives you seed, plant it and see what happens! Sometimes it will be exactly what you expect and want. Sometimes it won't. The latter is the best teacher.

### Frugality

Why do you have a vegetable garden? So many reasons! Fresh food? Yep. To stay busy? Um, maybe once I'm retired, but with three kids I'm already good on that one. To decrease your carbon footprint? Sure! For fun? Well, yes, most of the time. While some are happy to spend more on their garden than the sum of its economic output, for others of us gardening might be the most economical way to put fresh food on the table. Whichever situation you are in, saving some seed will make a big impact on the economy of your gardening. Consider my kale example from above. While I couldn't use all of it, imagine how much it would have cost me to buy peanut butter jars full of kale seed! (My only regret is that I did not use some for sprouting greens!)



Another reason to save seeds is seeing your plants all grown up. We usually eat zucchinis when they are 7 or 8 inches long. They need to be fully grown, however, in order to contain ripe seed. One caution, however, is that if you don't keep an eye on them, they may be turned into baby dolls. I found this one tucked in for the night in our daughter's toy cradle.

### Broader Horizons

The *Garden Seed Inventory* published by the Seed Savers Exchange aims to catalogue all of the commercially available vegetable garden seeds available for sale in the United States and Canada. In 2005, they listed nearly 8500 different unique non-hybrid varieties. That accounts for all of the different tomatoes, green beans, peppers, salad greens, sweet corn—whatever you might grow in your garden, there are about 8500 choices all in.

The Seed Saver Exchange also publishes a yearbook of seeds offered by its members. These are not commercial growers selling their seed, but home gardeners willing to send you some of the seed they grown in their own gardens if you give them a little donation to cover postage and hassle. There are nearly 14,000 unique varieties offered by Seed Saver Exchange members—almost twice as many as you can buy commercially. The thing is, these are not people *selling* their seed—they are gardeners *sharing* seed. The idea is that you will be saving them yourself and, ideally, reoffering them back to the community as a member of the exchange. The punchline: you'll have access to a much greater variety of vegetables if you are willing to put in the effort of saving them yourself.

The opportunities go beyond formal exchanges. Ever go to the farmers' market and bring home the best tomato ever? Save some seeds, grow it out, and see what happens! (See Tomato section for more info on *what* might happen!) My brother-in-law's father got some of the best tomatoes for a northern climate that I had ever tasted. "What variety are they," I asked. His answer socked me: "No idea. Got 'em from a guy from Russia who used to live down the street. Now I grow them and save the seed myself." He gave me a few seeds, and they have been a mainstay of our summer diet ever since.

Sadly, my brother-in-law lost his father a few years ago now. While this was a sad time, it is difficult to



### KEEPING IT SIMPLE

*Why* we choose to save seed will inform to some degree *how* we save seed. More on this later.

There are several reasons to save seed including saving money, having access to more varieties of seeds than those commercially available, and the opportunity to select seeds to do better in our garden year over year.

describe the effect of seeing his tomatoes sprout anew each spring and fill our plates with that familiar acidic sweetness. I say this in no casual way: this is food for the soul. What a loss if we had not been able to save those seeds, not only for ourselves and our garden, but possibly for the plant. I have no idea who else—if anyone—is saving those Russian tomatoes (which I now call “Zurovchak” after the man who supplied them to me).

The important point here is this: if we leave seed saving completely to industry, who will save seeds like the Zurovchak tomato? And if we lose varieties like that, what will happen to the diversity of genetics available to plant breeders as we encounter new pressures on our garden such as diseases and climate change? Our conclusion: seed saving belongs in the home garden!

### Evolving With Your Garden

This is perhaps my favorite reason to save seed, but it’s a bit complicated. The following story explains it best.

When we first began gardening, we wanted to grow dry beans for chili and baked beans. We didn’t have much space, so we wanted pole beans for better yield, and I was enticed by the description of “True

#### Selection

When you have a group of plants (in my example above, dry beans), and you save *only* the seed of plants with certain characteristics (in this case, early maturity), you are practicing *selection*. Technically, you no longer have the exact same variety. That said, this is a perfectly legitimate activity. Just be sure that if you share the seed, you let people know what you’re up to. If I were to reoffer

my True Red Cranberry Pole bean at a seed saving society, I would have to call it, “Jim’s Early Selection of Cranberry Pole” or something like that. As you are (hopefully) starting to notice, I strongly encourage folks to consider their gardens as ongoing experiments. When you share your results, however, just be clear with people about what you are giving them!

Red Cranberry Pole Bean” in a seed catalogue. Not only did they look unique, but they were a Native American variety from central Maine—how cool! The first year I grew them out in our northern Vermont climate, however, I was befuddled that they came from central Maine. They barely ripened before a hard killing frost had its way with our garden in the early fall, and they had to survive some pretty close calls with light frost to get even that far. It was during one of these close calls that I decided to save just a few beans as seed from those plants that were ripening first. Doing this guaranteed a seed crop, though we were fortunate enough to get good food crops as well.

### About Experimentation

The best advice I can give you about selection—or anything else in seed saving for that matter—is to experiment. I have learned so much from doing things I have been told not to do (I’m talking strictly seed saving here, of course, right!), even though sometimes the results have been downright disastrous. Once I wanted to try saving leek seed. We loved eating leeks but didn’t have much space for them. Unlike some vegetables, you can’t eat your leeks and save them for seed, too. So, what to do? I simply took the biggest, most succulent-looking leeks and put them on the table with some butter and potatoes. I took the wimpiest, smallest ones that would have not added much to the table, and what,

in my great wisdom, did I do with those? You guessed it: that was my seed stock. I hope you can see where this is heading because, at the time, I did not. I planted those leeks out the next year to grow to seed (see Biennials). I was so proud when they sprouted nice round flower heads. I immediately showed my wife the beautiful viable seed I got, and lots of it. I planted that seed the next year and...

Let’s just say the apple (or in this case—the leek) doesn’t fall far from the tree. We had skinny, wimpy-looking leeks that were “just like mom and dad.” While I didn’t plant any more of that leek seed, it was one of the most valuable seed crops I’ve ever grown (metaphorically speaking, of course).



I hope that from whatever comfy place you are reading this book, you might be able to anticipate what would happen if you took the earliest maturing plants as seed and replanted it year over year. I'm not too proud to admit it: I had no idea what I was doing, though it has a name. It's called selection. I was selecting for those plants that matured earliest, and indeed, pretty soon I was astounded to see that the plants began to mature earlier and earlier and were no longer threatened by frost every fall. What a remarkable thing I did to improve my garden, without really knowing what I was up to! If you'd have asked me then how best to improve your garden, I might say with more compost, good crop rotation, etc., etc. Who knew that helping your seeds along by teaching them what it is you value most out of them was something a humble home gardener could do? This shouldn't surprise us, however. Again, our ancestors have done this for millennia.

This is absolutely my favorite reason to save seed: we grow together. Every year they teach me something, and I teach them in return. With good stewardship, the soil not only gets a little richer, but my plants get to know it a little better. The garden is not *my* sole endeavor, then, but a collaboration. The plants, the seeds, the soil, and the gardener—we all grow together.



When you are open to seeing your garden as an experiment, you don't always get the results you expect, but often you do get lucky and learn something new!