



# seed saving



## what is it?

It's collecting and storing the seeds from your favourite fruit and veg, to grow them again in the future, or to swap them. Some seeds will be present in the fruit and veg themselves – tomatoes, pumpkins, beans etc, and some plants have to be left to 'go to seed'. People have always saved and swapped seeds, and travelling seed merchants spread them around the country. Seed catalogues are a recent phenomenon. In the 1920s, seeds started to be standardised via government legislation, as people were giving all sorts of local names to the same seeds. Today you can still find 'standard seed' written on seed packets. This resulted in a huge loss of diversity as many unique, local varieties disappeared.

In the 1960s, there were still lots of small seed companies, and each one offered a wide range of seeds. But EU legislation standardised and restricted varieties in national lists, so that customers knew exactly what they were getting. Consumer protection might have been a noble aim, but in the process, a lot of diversity, interest, quirkiness and fun was lost. The seed industry was standardised and centralised, small companies went under, big companies got bigger, offering only a small range of seeds specially for large-scale growers, and culminating in the current attempts of the GM multinationals to control our food supply. But some people continued to save their own seed, because they knew they wouldn't be able to get them again if they were lost. Now, organisations like Garden Organic are calling on gardeners to send them samples of local / family seeds. They uncovered many thousands of old varieties, which have been named and added to the Heritage Seed Library.



*a handful of dried tomato seeds*



*a seed swap event in Southampton*

## what are the benefits?

- you don't have to buy seeds
- you'll have seeds that suit your local topography, soil and climate
- 'amateur', non-standard, local seeds passed down through the generations are known as heirloom varieties – they are 'open pollinators' (nature produces the seeds, as opposed to seed companies deliberately choosing parent plants), which makes them genetically very strong, and able to withstand wet conditions, drought, pests or disease more than 'inbred' standard seeds
- amateur varieties are natural plants, not genetically modified or hybridised; they tend to be grown organically, so send their roots further down into the soil to get nutrients, when they need them, and to provide more nutritious food than non-organic, where fertilisers are placed on top of the soil, encouraging shallower roots
- local varieties have a longer harvesting time, providing fresh food throughout the year; they tend to be taller, so can be harvested from lower down the plant first, then from higher up
- once varieties are gone, they're gone – there will be a loss of diversity that is not only a great shame in terms of taste and interest, but will result in our food supply being more susceptible to pests or disease in future. Gene banks can preserve seeds, but there are not enough of them, and they sometimes close due to lack of funding. The only way to maintain diversity is to grow, save and swap seeds ourselves

But perhaps the greatest benefit of saved seeds is that they are not genetically modified (GM). The GM industry is about standardisation *par excellence*, as well as enriching the enormous, extremely wealthy biotech companies. Their



a fennel plant 'gone to seed'

vision for food production is vast fields of one crop, the seeds of which are owned by one company – a disaster in terms of diversity, food security, ecology and control of our food supply. Often you can't save the seed of GM crops at all – so-called 'terminator genes' have been spliced into them so that the seeds are not viable, so farmers have to go back to the GM companies to buy more. In Iraq, companies like Monsanto monopolised the supply of seeds after the war, and the US prevented Iraqis from using their own seeds. They can never get their seed heritage back – the longest in the world – over 10,000 years, as Iraq is where agriculture began. It's happening everywhere – it's just that the Iraq war gave GM companies the opportunity to do it wholesale via the direct control of a country and its legal system (see resources).

## what can I do?

You can get warmed up by attending seed swap events that are held all over the country (just do a web search - seed swap and the name of your town). You'll be able to meet and get advice from lots of keen gardeners. These events are important because it's now illegal to sell unusual seeds that are not on official national lists, and this is a way of guaranteeing their survival. There are potato days as well – and these events usually include seed-swap tables. Seed potatoes are not swapped at these events but they are for sale – sometimes as many as 100 varieties.

Wakehurst Place in Sussex is well worth a visit too. It is the home of the Millennium Seed Bank, containing the seeds of around a fifth of all the world's plants, including trees. Then just have a go. If you make mistakes, it's not a disaster, and you'll learn as you go. Each plant will be different in terms of harvesting, extracting, drying storing and planting seeds. For example, some plants are self-pollinating (peas, tomatoes, French beans), whilst others can be easily cross-pollinated by insects with other varieties (onions, beetroot, spinach) , so your seed may not be exactly what you're expecting. Also, some vegetables are biennial, producing flowers and seed in their second year of growth (carrots, chard, beetroot). For details of specific plants you'll need a book or Garden Organic guidelines, and you can attend a course for practical experience.

You could leave the end plant on every row to go to seed, but make sure they're strong-looking specimens. When it comes to collecting, it's not always obvious what's the seed and what's the chaff. Once you've worked it out, after harvesting, shelling (if necessary) and drying, label the seeds and put into cold storage. This makes the seed go into dormancy – nature's way of stopping the seed germinating until the next season. Some families of seed can be stored for longer than others. Parsnips can only really be stored for one season – so it's best to grow your own to make sure that they're viable. At the other extreme, seeds of the cabbage family will store for 7 years – and everything else is between these two.

## resources

- LILI have courses, links and a range of useful books, including:
- *Back Garden Seed Saving*, Sue Stickland
- *Seed to Seed*, Suzanne Ashworth
- *Saving Seeds*, Marc Rogers
- gardenorganic.org.uk, 02476 303517 - send your seed samples; plus seed saving guidelines
- gardenorganic.org.uk/hsl - Heritage Seed Library
- do a web search on Iraq / Monsanto to find out about the destruction to their seed heritage
- gardenswapshop.co.uk - swap seeds online
- seedysunday.org - big annual event in Brighton
- kew.org/visit-wakehurst - Wakehurst Place, home of the Millennium Seed Bank

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