

# Love that tomato? Then be a Seed Saver

by Linda Harmon

According to Victory Seeds:

*Since the 1980s and the boom of the "biotech era," the goal of the mainstream seed industry, is to force growers to purchase new seed every year. They hope to break thousands of years of the agricultural practice of farmers saving seed... It is our personal feeling that the risks of using these altered varieties far outweigh any possible benefits. We have vowed to protect and promote open-pollinated and heirloom seeds.*



Are you a gardener who loves the taste of a succulent tomato? If so, you might consider taking on seed saving. Nature has provided us with a complete food bearing system, and as long as you pay attention and follow a few short steps you can be a seed saver too.

Plants grow flower and fruit, not to feed us, but to reproduce. The fruit, nut or vegetable that we eat is just one stage in a plant's normal life cycle.

People have been saving seeds for at least 11,000 years, but over the last 50 years with the commercialization of seeds, the demise of the family farm, the rise of agribusiness, and the domination of the seed market by a handful of firms like Monsanto, seed saving has almost disappeared from the public's consciousness. By saving seeds you can help reverse that trend, preserving your favorite heirloom plants from extinction and helping the environment by preserving its diversity. I've found it's easier than you might think.

Simply defined, seed saving is collecting and preserving the seeds or tubers of open-pollinated vegetables, grains, herbs, or flowers for use in the future. An open-pollinated plant, pollinated naturally by insects and nature not the human hand, allows the plant to adapt to local conditions and develop with the evolution of the environment. That ability is lost with hybrids.

Camille Sears, a 50 year resident and gardener in the Ojai Valley, opened up her home and her refrigerator to explain the seed saving process and give would-be seed savers some tips.

Rule number one; keep yours seeds cold and dry.

"If you want to keep seeds for a long time, even for decades," said Sears, opening her spare refrigerator stocked with over 400 different kinds of seeds, "keep it cold and dry. The two enemies of seeds are heat and humidity."

Sears, with a degree in meteorology and a career as an expert witness in cases of environmental air pollution, has been saving seeds since childhood. She calls herself a "selector not a collector." She has "grown-out" quite a few of her specimens on her four acres, but many are no longer viable due to the moisture and heat of time. She regrets not having preserved them very well in the beginning, out of ignorance.

Rule number two; only plant one variety of a plant and plan your growing your space accordingly.

"You want to keep them pure, so basically grow one variety," said Sears, unless you separate them on different ends of your property. "You don't want them to cross-pollinate, keep the variety pure." Sears explained several varieties of tomatoes are okay to plant together but others like peppers, squash, cucumbers, and melons will give you "surprises." Some of those surprises you may like and some not.

If you really get into developing new seed strains later, you can grow out combinations you like and then use "selfing" to preserve the characteristics. "Selfing is when you hand pollinate using the pollen from two identical plants that you like," said Sears, warning you may get hundreds of different variations. "That's what I'm doing here, finding the things that do best here and need the least intervention. Use less water, like the heat, and melons that don't split when they are ripe... We've probably tried 150 kinds of melons. If I could only plant one it probably would be one from India, where Krishnamurti was born."

To get started harvesting seeds, Sears says she just cuts open the vegetable or fruit, separates and removes the seeds from the flesh and then partially dries them by placing them on a plate (or screens for herbs, which have smaller seeds).

"Use a real plate as a drying surface because you'll never get them off a paper one," said Sears. She also recommends getting the flesh off the seeds by allowing them to stand in water for a few days, letting the remaining flesh fall away, and then passing them through a small wire or plastic colander. This is called "fermenting" and the seed itself will not rot.

"It also cleans the seed," said Sears. "I always do my watermelons that way, as it prevents melon blotch disease... I spend a lot of time with my colander."

Sears says there is no need for fancy equipment.

"After I wash, dry, and separate the seeds by hand, I put them in here with these silica beads to really dry out," said Sears, opening a large plastic air-tight container filled with six open jars of different squash seeds, surrounded by silica beads. She orders her silica beads which she orders online and dries them in the oven to reuse. "After the seeds have been in here about a week they're completely dry and can be stored in an air-tight clean container for years."

Sears labels each jar with a code that tells her which plant and season the seeds came from, and stores them into her refrigerator. "See this Mb2-5c," said Sears holding up a jar of her squash seeds. "It's a cross between Sibley and Red Kuri. We breed our own vegetables here too. What I'm going for is one sweeter than sweet potatoes, sweeter than melons. We've been working on it for four years now."

Sears plans on stabilizing the cross so it can be open pollinated and eliminate the need for others to buy seed year after year.

"This is the way it used to be up until the 1950's," said Sears. "People made their own. It's important to get as many of these open-pollinated varieties out there to people as possible. There are so many things changing but here is something we can take control of. That's really powerful. I think that it's only going to grow."

If you're ready to try seed saving, Sears says beans, cucumbers, melons and herbs are all pretty easy and a good

choice for the beginning seed saver. Remember to make sure they are of an open-pollinated seed variety and not a hybrid. The web is a good source. You can even join the Seed Savers Exchange and receive a monthly journal that traces seed developments, putting you in touch with other like-minded folk. They offer "Seed to Seed," a complete seed-saving guide, and a downloadable catalogue. Sears started me out with an envelope of "Mrs. Moody's Sicilian Long Green Beans" seeds, several beautiful "Druzba" tomatoes from Czechoslovakia, and a hot pepper she loves. My tomato seeds are now fermenting on my window sill.

To learn more go to: [seedsavers.com](http://seedsavers.com), [victoryseeds.com](http://victoryseeds.com), or [ancientcerealgrains.org](http://ancientcerealgrains.org).

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Seed saver terminology-

**Fermenting-** is the submerging of a plant's fruit in water to free the flesh from its seeds.

**Heirloom plants-** Plants commonly grown in the past and no longer used in modern large-scale agriculture; grown either through open pollination or, in the case of fruit trees, propagated from grafts and cuttings.

**Hybridized or cloned plants-** These plants don't produce seeds that are "true to type," i.e. they do not reproduce themselves identically in the next planting and do not maintain their parent plants characteristics.

**Open-pollination-** Pollination that occurs in nature and is not achieved by the human hand.

**Landraces-** Plants that prove reliable and well-adapted to a certain locality; sometimes called "folk varieties."



Camille Sears