

SAVING VEGETABLE SEEDS

I have a simple motto; Seek, sow, save, share. Seek out unusual, rare, endangered but above all, delicious varieties of vegetables. Grow them in my garden overlooking the Severn Estuary firstly for the kitchen, and if they cut the mustard, to be added to my library of some 480 varieties. Save seed from some of the crop – naturally! Finally and most importantly, share seeds with anyone and everyone who wants to grow their own vegetables with a special focus on reconnecting displaced people with their indigenous food culture by growing the vegetables they would have cultivated in their homelands.

Saving seeds is really not difficult and requires no special skills. The very easiest crops to save are those which are 'selfing', in other words, do not need a neighbouring plant and the help of pollinators like bees to cross-pollinate with. These self-fertile varieties include peas, French beans and tomatoes. In the case of peas and French beans all one needs to do is leave a few pods on the vines until they are dry, shell them and store them somewhere cool and dry until you want to sow them the following year. In the case of tomatoes, simply extract the seeds from very ripe fruit, rinse thoroughly – ideally leave the seed to soak in a jar of water for five days to break down the membrane around the seed which inhibits germination – put to dry on greaseproof paper in a warm but not sunny place, an east or west-facing windowsill is ideal, and when dry put in an envelope and store with your other seeds.

I have seeds in my library which are twenty years old and are still viable. This is because the trick to their longevity is to keep them cold as well as dry. I keep all my seeds in airtight containers; jam jars and Tupperware boxes, in the fridge. Of course, not all seed is very long-lived, but I reckon on holding seed for at least seven years before growing them on again for more seed.

There are vegetables that are 'selfing' but very attractive to bees and so will cross-pollinate easily with members of the same species. These include broad beans and runner beans, which unless isolated from other varieties will freely cross. So, if your neighbour is growing a different variety any seed you save is likely to be a hybrid. This is fine if the result is prolific and tasty. Grow it for long-enough and it will become an heirloom. I always recommend people who are saving broad and runner beans that are not true to the original cultivar, to give them a name and preserve them by saving seeds.

Other varieties that will cross are the cucurbit family – squash, cucumbers, melons and courgettes. However, there are different species of squash that will not cross with others. So, if you want to save seeds of squash be sure to grow only one variety of any species. The seed packet should include the Latin name in the description. There is *moschata*, or butternut types; *pepo* known as summer squash which includes courgettes and small squash like table queen or acorn squash. *Maxima* is the classic winter squash which includes pumpkins. Cucumbers will cross with others but not squash, ditto melons. Saving seeds from these crops is easy and trouble-free. Just let the fruits ripen fully and then remove the seeds, give them a good wash and dry like tomatoes.

Capsicums are also very easy to save seed from but again will cross with other varieties, so if you want to save seed grow only one variety or isolate them from others. I grow different varieties in each of my two polytunnels and the greenhouse and even in a large cold frame. One of my favourite vegetables to save seed of are lettuce. You only need to let one plant bolt and leave Mother Nature to do the rest. The flowers attract pollinators so only let one variety go to seed

in your garden to avoid possible crossing. The white fluffy flowers each contain a few seeds which can be plucked from the plant when fully ripe and dry. I also love to save carrot seed. I select around 16 carrots that best represent the cultivar which I keep through the winter and then encourage back into growth in the spring. They will grow to at least 2 metres with vast umbrals of white flowers loved by all types of pollinator. One needs to grow lots of plants because carrots are known as out-breeders which means they need to be pollinated by other flowers on the same or neighbouring plants. I also save beetroot seed, which, like the carrot is a bi-annual, producing seed in its second year. Again, the flowering plant is huge with great strings of flower stems that shed pollen in huge quantities. The ripe seed can be stripped from the plant between finger and thumb. They are out-breeders too and like sweet corn and spinach are wind pollinated.

Home saved seed becomes genetically predisposed to grow well where it was cultivated. I find I get better germination, greater viability and more stable crops. I also save money and feel that I am following in the footsteps of our distant ancestors, those Neolithic farmers who, 10,000 or more years ago, started to domesticate the wild parents of our vegetables.