



Seed Saving Guide

for participants of Ishtar's
International Network of Feral
Gardens (SAVAC)

Christina Battle Fall 2020

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What a summer! I'm sure you'll agree that it is difficult to reflect on. I hope planting, growing, and harvesting has helped make your summer smoother, calmer, and more gratifying than it might have been otherwise. I am so grateful to have had the chance to escape for a few hours here and there and just sit still with plants growing nearby. It's made all the difference.

I've been thinking a lot about what to share in this final publication for *Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens*. It has been great knowing that you're all 'out there' gardening over the summer, thinking about the complicated issues tied up within at the same time, all while under the shadow of global pandemic. I've been thinking a lot about this idea of a 'network' and how little might be needed in order to foster one - a common goal, an idea, an action - and how truly powerful that is.

I've been thinking about the tendency to focus on harvest this time of the year, and how important that is (especially right now, and especially if you're able to share your harvests with others). Instead, though, I'm going to focus this final publication on seed saving, which might seem an obvious choice, given my relationship to seeds (!) but also because I like to think it helps promote thinking about the future, while harvests make me think more about the present (or even the past). Saving seeds helps me prepare for future gardens, future weather, future expectations, and future potentials. It also helps me carry through the winter. I harvest seeds throughout the summer and fall, but leave much of the processing for after the snow hits. Seed processing can be a tedious and repetitive act - which I find perfect for the cold darkness of winter. As I separate, sift and sort through seeds, it helps me look forward to the spring to come. I really value the labour involved - I don't mean to suggest it has to be *work* in the usual sense - I think about it more as *preparation*. This final publication is meant as a sort of how-to guide to help you think more about seeds and how to save them with the hope that it'll help you get thru winter and prepare for the spring (and maybe you'll consider sharing your seeds with others as well).

With many thanks to everyone at SAVAC and to all of you for being part of this network. - Christina

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOME BASICS.

I like to think that much of seed saving is intuitive - plants want to grow, they want to disperse and spread out - you can learn a lot by just watching how a particular plant spreads seeds on its own. There are some botanical things that are helpful to know, though - especially if you want to access the many seed-saving books and resources out there (there are lots of resources online - one book that I get endless use out of is "The Seed Garden" published by the Seed Savers Exchange). This zine is going to prioritize the basics.

One thing to keep in mind is that, in seed saving terms, many of the vegetables we grow are actually classified as fruits based on how they reproduce, and the terms are often used interchangeably. With veggies easily classified as fruits - like tomatoes and peppers - its easy to see the seeds that will need saving. But others, like greens and root vegetables are less familiar to most since we don't often see or utilize their flowers and inevitable seeds. Fruits fall into two categories when it comes to seed saving: fleshy (like tomatoes or cucumbers - which require a wet process) or dry (like beans or lettuce).

I've mentioned the issue of maintaining varieties through distance before, I'm not going to get into it too much here, but just be aware that, if some cross pollination has occurred in your garden across varieties, the seeds you save and grow again anew might not produce exactly how you expect. My only advice is - just be open to it! It can be a great and mysterious learning process!

Timing is one of the most important things to be aware of when planning to save seeds: for fleshy fruits, make sure to wait until fruits have fully matured before saving (let those tomatoes turn their ultimate colour to ensure the seeds have fully developed); for dry fruits, hold off picking pods until they are completely dry - almost to the point of cracking (leave a few bean pods to dry out before harvesting for seed).

Processing methods vary - I'll focus on a few specific examples but, in general, if the fruit is of a similar sort, the method for saving seeds will also be similar.

CHIVES are always one of the first plants I collect seeds from during the summer. They are perennial, so if you planted chives for the first time this year, you won't see flowers (and thus seeds) until next year, but once they are established they bloom early and produce their seeds around mid-summer (at least where I'm located). They follow a dry process - the flowers will dry up and you'll see the seeds begin to burst out. My method of gathering is to cut off a bit of the dried out stem and seed head and place upside down in a paper bag until I'm ready to process (separate each seed) in the winter. You can use this same method for most flower heads.



chive bud [early May]



flower starting to dry [early July]



seed head fully dry [mid July]

TOMATOES are great for seed saving since they tend to produce lots of seeds and you can stagger saving them along with your harvests. Processing tomato seeds is multi-stepped:

1. remove seeds from the fruit (again, make sure the fruit is fully ripe and thus seeds mature).
2. tomato seeds need to ferment a bit as the first step of processing - I leave them in small jars on the counter for a couple days - keep a close eye on them though, they can mold really quickly (especially if you live someplace humid).
3. the fermentation process helps the seeds separate from the gelatinous material surrounding them (which actually helps to inhibit germination) but they will still need a hand to completely separate. I use a food processor, along with a bit of water - a couple quick pulses helps to separate the seeds. Those seeds that are viable will sink to the bottom, decant those floating along with other bits-n-pieces.
4. remove seeds from the processor and rinse over a strainer - flip them onto a paper towel, coffee filter or screens to dry.
5. store under cool, dry conditions.





LETTUCE! This is my first year properly dedicating time to harvesting lettuce seed. I'm really taken by how much the plants change across their lifespan.

Once the lettuce bolts (here this happened mid-June, along with the radishes) they grow tall stalks filled with tiny flowers that eventually 'feather' and turn into a pappus - to be taken by the wind like dandelions.





Once this feather-like stage begins, lettuce seeds are ready to start saving. I find it easiest to cut the whole stem, and put them upside down in paper bags until I'm ready to process. Each flower can produce 25-30 seeds so you can get a lot from one plant. I went a little overboard and have way too many this year - I'm looking forward to sharing them!





These are **RADISH** seed pods - which grow on long tall stalks after radish have bolted and grow flowers. I planted these radish in May, stopped harvesting and let them go to seed in mid-June, and harvested the seeds in this picture just the other day (mid-September). So, it takes a while for them to produce mature seeds (and thus, they take up a lot of room in the garden that could otherwise go to other plants).

The pods are ready when they're dry and about to crack (naturally they'd do just that and self-seed for another crop) - cut them from the stem of the plant and store in a paper bag to further dry until you're ready to process.

Some leafy greens like **ARUGULA** and **MUSTARD** produce seeds in a similar way: plants flower and then grow seed pods along tall stems. You can harvest in the same way as radishes.

BEANS and **PEAS** also produce dry seeds - instead of harvesting, let a few pods go to seed - they will dry out and the beans will harden (usually in late fall).

BIENNIAL VEGETABLES - This will be my first year saving seeds from biennial roots: **BEETS, SWISS CHARD**, and **CARROTS**.

The plants don't flower (and thus seed) until their second year. We tend to grow them annually, eating the roots and greens produced during the first season before the reproduction stage begins.

I've already had a bit of a mystery with swiss chard and beets (actually the same species, just different cultivars - *Beta vulgaris*) - and somehow have both already going to seed in my garden (in two different locations). I'm pretty stumped as my garden is new, and I'm sure both were planted this season (I'll be honest - I'm only 80-90% sure of this).

Beets, chard and carrots require vernalization before they shift into their reproductive stages - that is, they require a cold spell of about 4°C. Which only adds to the mystery, because, if they somehow were actually planted last year, the cold winter would have killed them outright (they tend to only survive to -9 / -12°C). Somehow though, they are producing seed and I'm crossing my fingers they'll be ready by fall.



*chard plant going to seed
[mid-summer]*

I left a few of each root vegetable back from harvest to keep over the coming winter and there are a few steps to follow: before winter, cut back tops to the crown and pull roots from ground; store in cool place (going to try my basement or garage) in a ventilated container (going to try a box filled with sawdust or sand); they should stay viable for up to 6 months (ideally at about 2°C); I'll replant outside in the spring (crowns just above the soil line); wait for them to flower, and then harvest the seeds once dried).

SEED LIFE SPAN varies and depends on storage conditions. Seeds that are kept in air-tight containers in a cool, dry place will last longer than those in more humid conditions. Here is some information on minimum seed life (depending on storage conditions):

Two Years: Onions, Leeks

One to Three Years: Okra

Three Years: Peppers

Three to Four Years: Beans, Peas

Four to Six Years: Eggplant

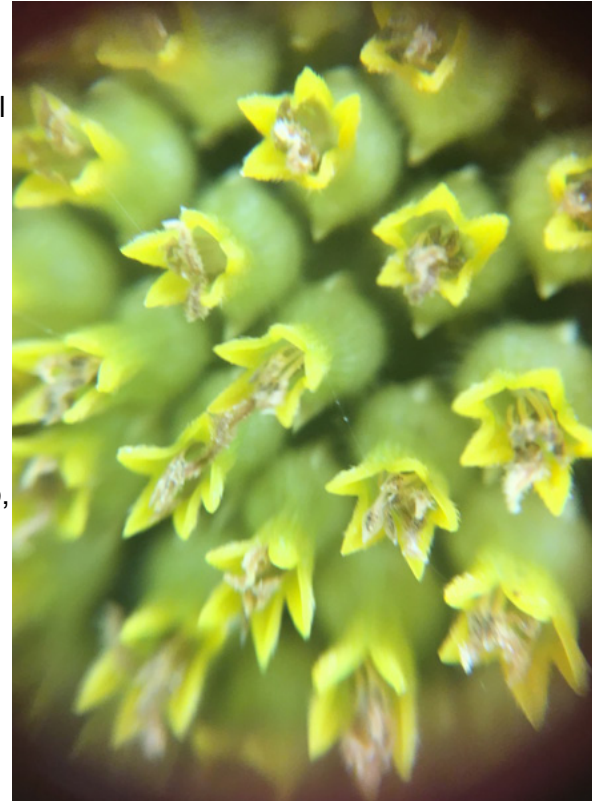
Five Years: Swiss Chard, Beets, Cucumbers, Watermelon

Six years: Arugula, Mustard, Radish, Squash, Collard, Tomatillo,
Lettuce, Carrot, Spinach

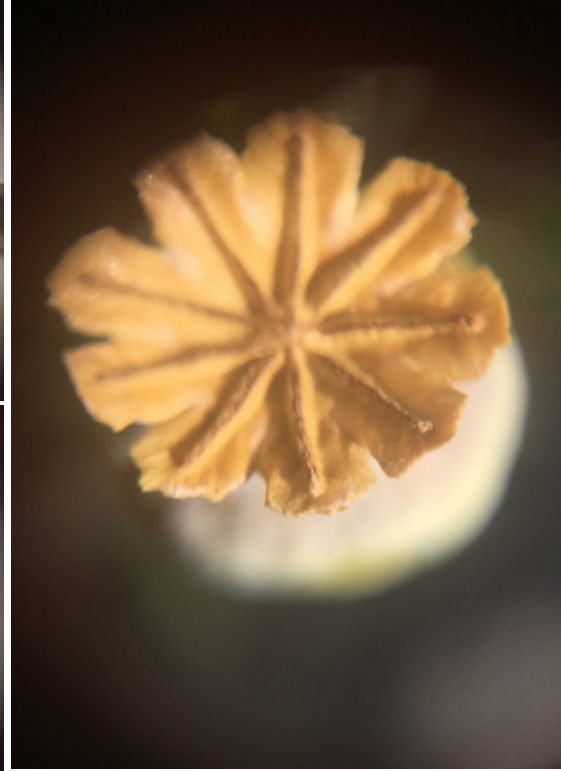
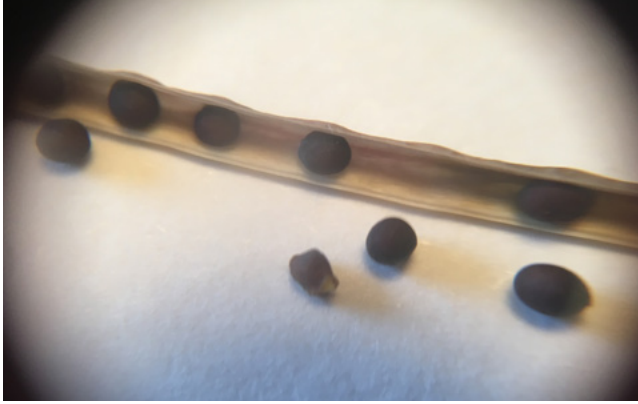
Five to Ten Years: Tomatoes

Several years: Cauliflower, Shallots

Remember these are just minimums – another good reason to start seedlings indoors is to test your seeds before planting!



immature sunflower seeds



*clockwise from top left:
mustard, poppy, cilantro*



fringed willow herb - this flower started growing in my garden as a weed, but now I'll look forward to them each year.