

PLANT POLLINATION AND SEED SAVING: AN OVERVIEW

Workshop at Tower Hill with Christie Higginbottom, Garden Research Historian

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Basic requirements

- Only open-pollinated (OP) seeds (also called “standard” or “heirloom”) can reliably “come true” from saved seeds.
- Most F1 hybrids (F1 stands for “first filial generation”) do not come true if you collect & plant their seeds. You must repeat the original cross-pollination, using the same species as originally crossed, to get the same hybrid properties.
- If the genus and species are the same, gardeners can create new varieties to obtain desired properties -- via cross-pollination. Although there are pitfalls outlined in the Workshop handout on our website, some varieties -- such as tomatoes, beans, peas, peppers, and lettuce -- can be good candidates for beginners.

Plant pollination and seed saving requirements vary according to plant physiology and life cycle. For a lively treatment, Higginbottom recommended out an out-of-print book by Angela Overy (sic) called *Sex in Your Garden*.

Why save seeds?

- To save money and avoid buying new seed each year.
- To preserve desirable endangered varieties. Before the advent of the recent seed-saving movement, nearly 80% of seed varieties available commercially in the early 20th century had been phased out. A great read is Janisse [Janeeze] Ray's *The Seed Underground: A Growing Revolution to Save Food*, published in 2012. Another source is a 2016 DVD entitled *Seed: The Untold Story*, which CGC is planning to present with Gleason Library next spring.
- To share open pollinated seeds with others, in order to increase the vitality of the gene pool. Examples include cabbage, radish, turnips, and rutabaga – “old-fashioned” species that need pollen from other plants in order to renew their vigor.

When are seeds ready to harvest?

- When they ripen. You have to let the plants “go to seed” and **not** deadhead the plants until the seeds ripen fully. (Clues: When seedpods are yellow, the seeds are hard and dry.)
- It's OK to harvest some plants of a variety and save a select few for seed-gathering.
- In some cases (tomatoes, cucumbers, melons), viable seeds can be harvested from fruits that are ready to eat. In many cases, however, you should ferment seeds for a few days before drying them. The books listed in the Workshop handout provide guidelines; you can also learn from other seed savers and your own experience. The Garden Club also hopes to sponsor a seed-saving workshop sometime soon.

Storing and reviving seeds

- Again, consult a basic reference for tips. Seeds must be dry, dark, and cool.
- Many seed companies list average seed viability. The CGC website has sample lists. Seed life can be extended by freezing hermetically sealed seeds, but great care is required. For example, seeds should be brought back to room temperature before they are unpacked. Consult the reference sources listed in the workshop handout.