

# SOWING AND SAVING SEEDS

Growing your own garden plants from seeds is fun, rewarding, and easy for many varieties. Likewise, saving seeds from your own garden and replanting them the next year is gratifying and can be so simple. Here's what you need to know to get started with sowing and saving seeds.

## WHY START WITH SEEDS?

### Selection

Even the best-stocked local nursery can offer only a limited choice of seedling varieties. When you grow from seed, you can pick from hundreds of options, including heirlooms and rare varieties that have unique colors, flavors, or other attributes that appeal to you.

### Good deals

A packet of seeds costs substantially less than buying a flat of transplants.

### Ready to trade

When seed packets have more than you need, you can easily share or swap them with another gardener, increasing the diversity of both of your plots. Earlier harvests and blooms. Starting with seeds lets you jump-start the growing season because you can plant them at exactly the right timing for your location. That can give you a couple weeks or more of growing time.

### Stronger, healthier transplants

Raising your own seedlings lets you lavish them with tender loving care, so they are vigorous and ready to grow when you move them into your garden.

### Always organic

When you start from seeds, you can ensure your plants have never been treated with toxic chemicals. Your garden will be safe and healthy from sowing to harvest.

## WHICH SEEDS TO START?

### Sow these types directly in your garden.

**Vegetables:** Beans, beets, carrots, corn, peas, radishes, salad greens (e.g. *arugula*, *mesclun mix*, *radicchio*, etc.), spinach, squash, turnips

**Annual flowers:** Cosmos, larkspur, love-in-a-mist, marigolds, nasturtiums, stock, sunflowers, sweet alyssum, sweet peas, zinnias

### Sow these indoors under lights before planting outside.

**Vegetables:** Broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, cucumbers, eggplant, lettuce, melons, peppers, squash, tomatoes

**Annual flowers:** Bachelors buttons, celosia, globe amaranth, impatiens, petunias, snapdragons

### Indoor seed starting basics

Raising seedlings indoors does not require advanced horticultural skills or expensive equipment. You can even use ordinary fluorescent light fixtures—no fancy grow lights needed. These are the basic steps.

### Gather containers

Many gardeners start their seeds in plastic "six-packs" leftover from purchases at nurseries. Just be sure you wash them thoroughly before re-using them. You can also buy new cell packs from online retailers. If you want to minimize expenses and resources, empty milk cartons or Styrofoam cups work, too. Whatever you use, be sure the containers have holes in the bottom that allow excess moisture to drain away. A plastic tray for your containers will keep the floor or table dry.

### Choose a fine medium

Buy seed-starting mix that has peat or coir (a by-product of coconut processing) as its base. It should also have vermiculite or perlite—minerals that absorb and disperse moisture to seedlings. Moisten, but don't saturate, your soil mix before planting. Fill each container with the mix and tamp down gently.



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### Sow the Seeds

Drop two or three seeds into each container. The package will tell you how deep to press them into the soil mix, but a good rule of thumb is about three times as deep as the seed's diameter. Some types need exposure to light to germinate, so just sit on them on top of the soil mix and gently press them so they make contact.

### Cover and Warm

Damping off is a fungal disease that kills little sprouts overnight. Sprinkling a little cornmeal on top of the soil protects your seedlings. Put a plastic cover over your containers—you can use take-out lids, dry-cleaning bags, household plastic wrap, or anything that will trap moisture so the seeds can absorb it. Experienced growers use heat mats to provide gentle warmth that helps seeds germinate. Any spot that's slightly warmer than room temperature will work.

### Place Under Lights

Check on your seeds starting about three or four days after you sow. Some plants take a few days to sprout, others a couple weeks or even more. Keep the soil mix moist but beware of overwatering. Once most of the seeds have sprouted, remove the plastic lid and set the containers under lights. If you are using standard fluorescent fixtures, set them about 4 inches above the sprouts. As the plants grow, you will keep that distance between the plants and light so be prepared to raise the fixtures.

### Feed and Water

Give the seedlings nothing but water until they have opened second pairs of "true" leaves (*after the tiny embryonic leaves that emerged from the seed*). Then begin feeding them with a dilute liquid organic fertilizer, such as a fish-and-seaweed blend (*available at garden centers and online*). Feed once a week, increasing the concentration as the plants grow. Water when the soil is closer to dry than to damp.

### Keep the Air Moving

Set up a small fan to gently blow your seedlings. The steady breeze ensures the plants have a steady supply of carbon dioxide and oxygen, discourages unwelcome fungi, and helps the seedlings develop thick, sturdy stems.

### Thin to Make Room

If you have two seedlings in the same container, you will need to make a choice before they are both stunted or too entwined to separate. Choose the most robust looking one and snip off the other at soil level.

### Harden Off

Check the seed package for guidelines on when to move the plants outside. About two weeks before that date, start to bring them outside for an hour or two. Gradually increase the amount of time they are outside so they can acclimate to the sun and fresh air.





## SAVING SEEDS

Harvesting seeds from your garden at the end of their growing season and replanting them the next is easy and rewarding. You save money that you would spend on new seeds and you get a supply of seeds you can barter with other gardeners to increase the variety in your garden. And, if you save seeds from the best plants in your garden, eventually you will have selected a strain that is perfectly adapted to your conditions.

### Which seeds to save?

Open-pollinated vegetable and annual flower varieties are produced by seeds that have resulted from natural pollination of the parent plants. If you save and grow those seeds the next season, the new plants will have the same characteristics as the parent plants. If you replant the seeds of hybrid varieties (*sometimes labeled as F1*), they will not have identical attributes as the plants you collected them from. So, if you want to save seeds, start with open-pollinated varieties.

*Some seeds, such as tomatoes, need a few steps before you can save them, but these need only to be dried before storage.*

**Vegetables and herbs:** Beans, cilantro, dill, peas, peppers  
**Flowers:** Calendula, cosmos, marigolds, nasturtiums, poppies, sunflowers, zinnias

### Steps to Seed Saving

1. **Gather seeds** when the flowers or seed heads are dry. Spread the seeds out on newspaper, brown paper bags, or paper plates to allow them to dry completely.
2. **Write the names** of the varieties beside the seeds so you don't mix them up. Keep them in a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight for about a week.
3. **Pack the dry seeds in small envelopes and label.** Store them in glass jars with tight lids or resealable plastic bags.

### Saving Tomato Seeds

To keep tomato seeds, you should ferment them first to separate them from the gel sacs that surrounds them in the fruit.

1. **Cut the tomato in half** and scoop or squeeze out the seeds and gel into a small bowl or container. Add 1/4 to 1/2 cup of water. Set the container aside, out of the sun, for 3 to 5 days. A moldy film will form on top.
2. **To separate the seeds**, carefully scoop off the film. Then add some more water and stir. Viable seeds will sink, so carefully pour off the water and the floating bits of pulp. Repeat until all the pulp is gone and you have clean seeds. Spread them in a single layer on a screen or a paper plate to dry (*seeds tend to stick to paper towels*).
3. **Pour the seeds into envelopes**, label, and keep in a glass jar or sealed plastic bag away from heat and direct sunlight.

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