

Collecting seed from your garden





Advantages of collecting seed

Collecting seed from your garden is a simple and economical way to grow plants for free. It's also a cheap way to bulk up plants in your garden.

It can be useful to collect seed as “insurance” for plants that are not fully hardy, like *Salvia*. You can keep a supply of seed to plant in case the original plants do not survive the winter.



EXTRACTING SEEDS OF *GLYCYRRHIZA GLABRA* FROM SEED CASES

Some plants are monocarpic, so they die after they flower - this includes *Meconopsis*, some *Verbascum*, as well as annuals and biennials. These species can only be grown from seed. Some perennials are slow or difficult to propagate, like *Pulsatilla* and some bulbous plants.

Fresher seeds from plants like hellebore can have a higher germination rate. Seed sold in shops will have been stored for an unknown amount of time, and they can have variable quality and germination rates. Seed collected from healthy plants in your garden or local area are likely to be better for your environment and soil, and give you better results.

Collecting seed can also be sociable. You can swap seeds with your friends and neighbours, or you can join gardening societies to share seeds. RHS Members can purchase seed collected from RHS Gardens at a discounted rate. Other societies include the Hardy Plant Society, the Alpine Garden Society, and the Cyclamen Society.



Best time to collect seed

You should collect seed when it's ripe, but before it is dispersed naturally. You can harvest seed throughout the year, but the peak time for collection is between June and October

You'll need to monitor the fleshy fruit or drying seed capsules and watch for the ripening of the seed. Pods or capsules generally dry and change colour (often from green to brown) and then start to split.



COLLECTING SEEDS OF *PEUCEDANUM VERTICILLARE* AT RHS GARDEN WISLEY

Some pods have to be collected before they explode, like *Viola*, *Impatiens* or *Lathyrus*. You should collect seed from berries when they are ripe, but before they are taken by birds!

Other seed is dispersed by the wind, so will need to be collected before it blows away. Some seed are held in capsules for longer, but you need to collect them before they are washed away by rain and dispersed by wind. Choose a dry, still day for collecting light, fluffy seeds.

There are a few things that can be collected 'in the green', when they are immature and still green. These include *Anemone nemorosa*, *Calendula* and *Ranunculus*.

Bear in mind that seed from cultivars will not necessarily come true, but you could get some interesting results. It's also important to collect seed from healthy plants with good characteristics. If you can, try to save seed from several plants to maintain genetic diversity.



How to collect and dry seed

Collecting seed

When you collect seed, you should use paper bags or envelopes, as they are breathable. Plastic traps moisture and seed will rot.

For seed like *Campanula*, *Agastache* and *Aconitum*, you should gather whole seed heads. Cut the heads into your bag, taking care not to tip seed out. Then, shake the seed straight into a container. It's better to stroke some seed heads, rather than shake, for plants like *Astrantia*, scabious and *Amaranthus*.

For *Viola*, *Rhodochiton* and similar, collect single seed pods. Be careful to hold together any exploding pods.

Make sure to label your seed clearly, with the name of the plant and the date of collection.



Drying seed

Most seed with pods, capsules and cones will need to be dried to reduce moisture in the seed and to prolong the amount of time you can store it. Seed will go mouldy if not adequately dried before storage.

Most fleshy berries will need to be washed to remove the pulp and expose the seed before being dried and stored.

To dry seed, put them on brown paper on a tray; you can also place them into paper bags or envelopes. Then, place them in a warm, dry room with good ventilation – an airing cupboard is ideal.

If you collected the seed in damp conditions, turn them frequently to avoid mould.

Remember to cover exploding seed cases, from plants like *Geranium*, *Lathyrus*, and *Viola*. *Hamamelis* seed can travel up to three metres!

Leave the seed until everything is completely dry. This can take between seven to 10 days. Then store your seed in a cool, dry place in an airtight container.



How to clean seed and berries

Dry seed

To clean dry seed, take the seed capsules off any stems and remove the leaves. If necessary, break open seed capsules to release the seed.

Separate the seed from any other plant material. If seed is large enough, you can do this by hand. If not, try sieving or gently blowing the seed to remove light chaff. You can also roll the seed on blotting paper, as other material sticks to the blotting paper. Any remaining material can then be taken out by hand or with tweezers.



WASHING THE BERRIES OF *VIBURNUM BETULIFOLIUM* IN A SIEVE TO EXTRACT SEED

Berries

Berries can be stored for a short while in plastic bags in a refrigerator.

You can remove the flesh of berries by rubbing seed in a cloth under running water. You could also try squashing them in a sieve, using water to wash the flesh away, or squashing them with the back of a spoon in a jug of water. Adding a couple of drops of washing up liquid to the water can help remove the flesh or any natural oil. Generally, you'll find that viable seed will sink to the bottom of the jug, and the pulp and non-viable seeds will float.

Once the seed has been extracted you can then lay it out to dry. Once it is thoroughly dry, label and store somewhere cool and dry.

Some berries, like *Rosa*, can be dried and crushed before cleaning as dry seed.



How to store seed

Once dry and clean, seed is best kept in an airtight container in the refrigerator, but anywhere cool and dry will suffice. Adding a sachet of silica gel will absorb any remaining moisture.



Viability of seed

The length of time that seed stays viable depends on the condition of the seed when first stored, how long it is stored and what species of seed is being kept. For example, *Primula* seed loses viability faster than *Calendula*.

It's best to sow fresh seed every year. Some seed is best sown straight away, or as soon as possible, like hellebore and seed collected 'in the green'.

Other factors that can affect viability are the quality of the plant seed was collected from, the quality of the seed itself and how it's been stored.

What you will need

For collecting seed at home, we suggest you use:

- A plastic storage container with a lid, like a clean ice cream container
- Paper bags and envelopes
- Disposable latex gloves
- A sieve
- A jug for cleaning berries
- Tweezers
- Silica gel packets

RHS Seed Scheme

The RHS Seed Scheme has been running for over 100 years. The Seed Team collects seed from a huge range of plants from RHS Gardens, and RHS Members can exclusively order our specially harvested seeds. The Seed Scheme is open for online orders from December to February each year. Order your seeds and grow a little piece of the RHS in your own garden

Visit rhs.org.uk/seedlist for the latest catalogue