

Seed saving

Gardeners and potential gardeners often wonder if they can save the extra seeds that come in the packets. Since they commonly contain far more seeds than most of us can use (and friends or neighbors might not be interested in the unique varieties that many of us select from the catalogs) the question comes up frequently. The answer is generally “Yes”, with a few caveats.

Anyone who wishes to keep seeds from year to year must remember - they contain all the genetic material for that plant. They are more or less sensitive to the environmental conditions. After the package has been opened, moisture, light and air can have deleterious effects. To limit these, always press out the air and seal the package with tape if you want to retain them for next year. They rarely need to be refrigerated, and in fact, refrigeration can cause problems for certain plant varieties.

How reliable are the seeds from year to year? There is no single rule. Some seeds remain viable for longer than others, but even within plant varieties there can be a range. For instance, the rule of thumb for tomato seeds is that they can be used for up to four years. This means that they will germinate and produce for that long. Usually, if a seed germinates then it is likely to grow into a functional plant, as long as it receives proper conditions.

That four year guide is not rigidly fixed. Recently I found a packet of tomato seeds that I purchased in 2004.

Although I was not expecting any results, I planted them anyway, very thickly, in peat pots. Now, just over one week later, I am thinning these robust seedlings! The seeds of peppers, which are related to tomatoes, supposedly can only last for a couple of years. In the same store of ancient planting material, I found a 2007 pack of hot pepper seeds and put them in peat pots. Even these have come up (although not as vigorously as the tomatoes.) My experience here, however, is definitely an exception.

On the other hand, not all seeds will last for more than a year. Onion seeds tend to be fussy. We advise people not to bother planting them if they are over a year old. Still, if you have some from last season and have extra garden space, why not put them in the ground? If they germinate, you may get more onions than you expected. If not, you have lost nothing.



There is a definite time range within families of plants. Carrot seeds will last up to about three years, but those of parsnips, their cousins, are good for only one year. The seeds of broccoli and near relatives, cabbage, Brussels sprouts and cauliflower, will all stay good for five years, but experts recommend only four years for many other members of this genus.

Overall, saving leftover seeds is a good idea unless you were disappointed in the germination rate when the seeds were fresh. They will not improve with age.

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