

Advantages of collecting seed

- Plants for free – simple and economical
- Cheap way to bulk up plants in your garden
- Some plants die after they flower (they are known as monocarpic), such as *Meconopsis* and some *Verbascum* as well as annuals and biennials. Such species can only be grown from seed
- Some perennials are slow or difficult to propagate vegetatively, eg *Pulsatilla* and some bulbous plants
- Seed can be collected as 'insurance'. Some plants, like *Salvia*, are not fully hardy – seed is easy to collect and keep in case original plants do not survive over the winter
- Higher germination rate with fresher seed – for example, fresh *Hellebore* seed has a good germination rate if sown quickly. Bought seed has been stored for an unknown amount of time and can have variable quality and germination rates



Extracting seeds of *Glycyrrhiza glabra* from seed cases

- It's sociable:
 - Seed swaps with friends and neighbours (with their permission!)
 - You can join societies: The RHS has an exclusive membership benefit of selling seeds at a discount to members. Others include the Hardy Plant Society, the Alpine Garden Society, the Cyclamen Society
- Seed provenance – seed collected from healthy plants in your locality are likely to be better adapted to your environment and soil and give you better results.

Best time to collect seed

- 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 will 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
- Bear in mind the type of seed dispersal:
 - Some pods have to be collected before they explode – *Viola*, *Impatiens*, *Lathyrus*
 - Berries – when ripe but before they are taken by birds!
 - Some seed is dispersed by the wind so collect it before it blows away
 - Other seeds are held in capsules for longer so you have a bit more time, but you need to collect them before they are washed away by rain and dispersed by wind
- There are a few things that can be collected 'in the green' (ie immature and still green) – *Anemone nemorosa*, *Calendula*, *Ranunculus*
- Bear in mind that the seed from cultivars will not necessarily come true, but you could get some interesting results
- Collect from healthy plants with good characteristics. If you can, try to save seed from several plants to maintain genetic diversity
- Choose a dry, still day for collecting light, fluffy seeds.



Collecting seeds of *Peucedanum verticillare* at RHS Garden Wisley

How to collect and dry seed

Collection

- Use paper bags or envelopes to collect seed as they are breathable. Plastic traps any moisture and seed will rot
- Collect whole heads of some – *Campanula*, *Agastache*, *Aconitum*
 - Cut ripe heads off into bag, taking care not to tip seed out
 - Shake seed straight into container
 - Stroke seed out, eg *Astrantia*, *Scabious*, *Amaranthus*
- Collect single pods of some – *Viola*, *Rhodochiton*
- Collect berries when on point of ripening (watch for birds and squirrels taking an interest!)
- Carefully hold together exploding pods
- Make sure seed is well labelled with the name of plant and the date collected

Drying

- 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
- Put seed in trays, on brown paper or in paper bags/envelopes and place in a warm, dry room with good ventilation – an airing cupboard is ideal
- If collected in damp conditions turn frequently to avoid going mouldy
- Cover exploding seed cases – eg *Geranium*, *Lathyrus*, and *Viola*. *Hamamelis* seed can travel up to three metres!
- Leave until material is dry – a week to 10 days is a good guide. Then store in a cool, dry place in an airtight container.



Sharing the best in Gardening

COLLECTING SEED FROM YOUR GARDEN



How to clean seed and berries

Dry seed

- Take seed capsules off any stems and remove leaves
- Break open seed capsules to release the seed (if necessary). The seed is then separated 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
 - The seed can also be rolled on blotting paper – other material sticks to the blotting paper
 - Any remaining material can 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
- Some berries can be dried and crushed before cleaning as dry seed, eg *Rosa*
- Flesh can be removed by:
 - Rubbing seed in a cloth under running water
 - Squashing in a sieve, using water to wash the flesh away
 - Squashing berries with the back of a spoon in a jug of water
- You can add a couple of drops of washing up liquid to the water to help remove the flesh or any natural oil
- 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.



How to store seed and suggested kit

Once dry and clean, seed is best kept in an airtight container in the refrigerator, but anywhere cool and dry will suffice. Add a sachet of silica gel to absorb any 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. *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 eg *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 and how it's been stored.

What you will need:

Here are some suggestions of basic equipment you could use for collecting seed at home

- Plastic storage container with a lid (ie ice-cream container)
- Paper bags
- Disposable latex gloves
- Sieve
- Jug for cleaning berries (having mashed pulp from berries you'll generally find that viable seed will sink to the bottom of the jug and pulp and non-viable seeds will float)
- Tweezers
- Small envelopes
- Silica gel (use small sachets to store with seed in a fridge, or in a container somewhere cool and dry).



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