

Seed Saving – Try Your Hand

There has been great excitement at our place because most of the feijoa seeds we collected from our fruit last year have germinated. This is after more than 200 failed attempts to propagate this tree from cuttings – a victory for propagation by seed and seed saving.

Seed saving saves money, allows you to select seeds that are particularly suited to your climate, conditions and taste, enables us to keep genetic variety in plants since we can grow varieties not commercially grown, and most exciting of all, provides the chance come up with a new variety.

Many people in Inverleigh enjoy a delicious mid-sized tomato which was grown by a gardener called Clive. He shared seeds with his friend, Joy. She shared seeds and seedlings with friends and now, many years and generations of tomatoes later, Clive's beautiful, hardy tomato is still grown and enjoyed.

There are a few general tips for seed saving but it is always a good idea to do some research about when and how to collect from specific species.

Select seeds from healthy plants. They produce the biggest seeds containing the most stored food to support the plants when they first shoot. Don't collect from diseased plants because they can pass on disease pathogens to successive generations and neighbouring plants. Discard any seeds that are not in excellent condition. What you want is viability (ability to germinate) and vigour (ability to grow on strongly). The photo shows Keith with lettuces seedlings grown from saved seeds.



Ensure that parent plants are growing in the best conditions for their water, light and nutrient needs. Moisture is needed from the start of flowering, when seeds are starting to form, and later for pollen production. Dryer conditions are better when seeds are maturing – they need to dry out to survive the necessary period of dormancy until their next growing season. Damp or mouldy seeds can start to germinate early. Seeds should be harvested when fully mature, but some drying can be continued off the plant, particularly if rain threatens.

There are two main types of seeds – wet and dry. Wet seeds, such as tomatoes and pumpkins, have some pulp attached to them. Scoop the seeds into a bowl, tip water over seeds and pulp and gently dislodge the pulp with your fingers. Pulp and dead seeds will float, viable seeds will sink. Tomato seeds can also benefit from an extra treatment called 'fermenting', in which seeds and pulp are left in a container of water in a warm place (around 25°C) for a few days to remove substances from the seed coat which inhibit germination. Once you see bubbling and white mould on the top, wait a day or so and then clean and dry the seeds.

Some people around here successfully save tomato seeds by squeezing and spreading them, pulp and all, on to paper towel. The towel plus seeds and pulp are then thoroughly dried in the air. At planting time, the sheet of paper towel is laid on to a tray of seed raising mix and lightly covered with soil. This is the way Keith did our 'wet' feijoa seeds.

'Dry' seeds have husks or pods that dry out, as is the case with beans, carrots, basil, parsley and salvias. Simply collect, allow them to dry fully, rub away the unwanted casings and separate out the seeds. Once seeds are dry, store them in paper bags or envelopes labelled with the name of the plant and the date collected. You can pop in a sachet of silica, such as you get in a shoe box, to ensure dry conditions. Storage in a cupboard is fine for seeds being used in a few years, but more controlled cool temperatures may be needed for longer term storage. Some seeds are only viable for a year while others last longer – seeds found at archaeological digs have been germinated after more than a thousand years of storage.

Check the germination time and requirements for your seeds – some like heat treatment to mimic a fire (wattles), some have to experience a period of cold conditions (cold stratification for roses), some have to have their protective coatings broken down by soaking (legumes), filing (pumpkins) or nicking (hibiscus) or bird stomach acids (blackberries). The idea is to have good germination rates by mimicking or improving on nature. Good luck and have fun with your own seed saving.

Happy Gardening,

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