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## Cleaning Your Seeds

Harvesting seeds from the garden is not the end of the seed saving process, because most seeds come along with fluffy, gristly chaff or gooey pulp - all the remnants of the flowers and fruit where the seeds grew.

A lot of the time you can get away without perfectly cleaning your seeds, especially if you're only saving a small amount for your own use. But if you want to offer seeds to others, they should be nicely-separated and free from remnants of other plant parts.

Additionally, pulp and chaff around your seeds can absorb moisture from the air, potentially resulting in mold issues for the seeds in storage. Moreover, your seeds will take up less space if they're sufficiently cleaned, which is one of the major issues facing home gardeners.

There are three main categories of seeds when it comes time to clean them:

1. Seeds that grow in wet fruit
2. Seeds that grow in pods
3. Seeds that grow in fluffy or fragile seed heads

### Wet-fruited Seeds - Use Water



Tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, and melons are some examples of seeds that ripen inside a wet fruit. Usually the seeds are ripe when the fruit is fully ripe (exception being cucumbers), and the fruit should ripen on the plant to maximize nutrition to the seeds.

Carefully slice the fruit open, and scoop out the seeds, rinse with water, and let the seeds [dry fully](#) before [storing them](#).

This is simple for fruits such as peppers and cantaloupe melons, but trickier with some like tomatoes or squash. Every tomato seed is encased in a sac of jelly, which poses a few challenges: makes the seeds hard to handle, keeps the seeds dormant, and tends to absorb moisture even when the jelly dries out.

If you are only saving a few tomato seeds, you can rub off the jelly with your fingers or a cloth.

If you are saving many tomato seeds, it's easier to put them in a closed container at room temperature for 3 days, then rinse the rotten pulp through a sieve.

Read more about saving tomato seeds with our three-part series:

[How to Save Just a Few Tomato Seeds](#)

[How to Save Lots of Tomato Seeds](#)

[How to Save Even More Tomato Seeds](#)

With squash, the secret to freeing the seeds from the stringy pulp is to scoop them into a bucket of water, and rub them with your fingers until the strings separate.

## Podded Seeds - Use Air and/or Screens

Beans, peas, other legumes like chick peas, brassicas, and some garden flowers like larkspur grow in pods. The pods should always be allowed to mature to their dry, brown stage while on the plants to ensure the seeds are fed as much as possible.

It's okay to leave the seeds in the pods for a while, even until the following spring, as long as they are open to the air to allow moisture to escape.

You can easily remove the seeds by breaking pods open with your fingers, and that's the best way if you're only saving a few seeds. For larger amounts, you'll find that method too time consuming. Instead, you can crush the pods in a large container so they shatter open and drop their seeds. You can use almost anything to smash them because the seeds will be quite durable so long as they are dry enough.

Then sift the empty pods off the top, and you'll find your seeds at the bottom of the container. A screen, or a light breeze from a fan, can help separate the dust and the last bits of broken pods.

## Seed Heads - Use Air and/or Screens

Lettuce, most herbs, grains, and almost every garden flower grow their seeds in "heads" that turn brown when the seeds are ripe. You should let the seeds ripen fully on the plants. As the seed heads dry out, they often drop their seeds, which are now much more durable from the heads so you can just separate them by squeezing and rubbing.

The chaff is often difficult to separate from the seeds, and there is a lot of dust left behind. Start with the dust by sifting the seeds and chaff through a fine screen, small enough to keep the seeds but which allows the dust to float away.

Once the dust is gone, use an appropriately sized screen that allows the seeds to fall through but not the larger pieces of stem, leaves, and flower parts. Then, use a slightly smaller screen that will hold the seeds but allow the chaff and underdeveloped seeds to fall through.

A light breeze from a fan can help with this process, since the seeds are typically the most dense part of the heads. Gradually and carefully use the fan to blow the chaff away from the seeds, using your hands to sift through as needed. Patience is key here, or else the seeds may end up in the wind, too.

Learn more about saving seeds, and how to clean each species in our handbook "[How to Save Your Own Seeds](#)".

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## Drying Your Seeds

Seeds are meant to germinate when they're moist and hibernate when they're dry. That's why it's important to dry your seeds after you harvest them.

Open-air drying is the best way because it minimizes risk of damage to the seeds. There are several methods for creating just the right conditions for perfect seed drying, using ordinary household items.

### What does it mean for a seed to be "dry"?

When you harvest seeds from your garden they should be fully ripe. Once harvested, they should be cleaned. For some, they'll feel dry already at this point, but no matter the seed type, there is probably some moisture still, meaning drying is key regardless of how the seeds feel to the touch. Placing seeds directly into a jar or bag from harvest will usually result in mold within a few weeks.

### What's the best way to dry seeds?

The best way is to spread them out so the air can get at each one, and let them dry naturally in the open. Plates, wide bowls, pie plates, baking sheets, or serving trays are all good, as long as the seeds are spread thinly. You don't want to pile the seeds more than a couple of layers deep because the bottom seeds can't contact air so won't be able to dry quickly enough to avoid mold.

An even better way to get air contact on your seeds is to dry them on a screen because this allows for the air to reach them from the bottom as well. With this method, it's okay to layer them a bit thicker (three or four layers rather than two). There are a wide variety of sieves, strainers, frying baskets, and salad spinners that can be used. Window screens work well too.

If you are drying wet seeds, you should aim for them to be fully dry within three days. Longer than that and you risk them sprouting in your drying tray. This is disastrous for the seeds you can't reverse it and will be forced to either immediately grow out or throw away those seeds that sprout.



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No matter what method you use, here are two tips that make the drying process foolproof:

## Tip #1

### **Stir the seeds while they dry.**

This helps uncover any seeds that have less air contact, evening out the drying.

This is also the best time to break up clumps of seeds that will inconveniently stick together later. This is a very common thing with tomato seeds, for example. Stir them when they're half dry, and you'll have no clumps later on.

## Tip #2

### **Run an electric fan somewhere in the room.**

If the seeds don't dry quickly enough, or if the air is too wet during a rainy week, running a fan in the room will help to counter that.

Even a small amount of air movement can make a huge difference, so don't fret about placing the fan incredibly close to the seeds.

Heat is not necessary, and easily dangerous to the seeds. Some seed savers use dehydrators, or ovens set on a "low" temperature. While this could work without hitch, you run the risk of fatally overdrying your seeds.

Ventilation and air movement are more effective and safer than any form of heat.

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Here are a few tests you can try to see if enough moisture has been removed:

### **THE BEND TEST**

For large, flat seeds (e.g. squash), try to bend a seed - if it's flexible, it's not dry enough. A dry seed will break when bent.

### **THE HAMMER TEST**

For large, rounded seeds (e.g. beans, corn), hit a seed with a hammer - if it flattens, it's not dry enough. A dry seed will shatter when hit.

### **THE RUB TEST**

For smaller seeds (e.g. lettuce, tomato, carrot), rub a seed between two pieces of paper - if it leaves a wet spot, it's not dry enough. A dry seeds won't leave any moisture marks on the paper.

*TIP: Perform all tests on a number of seeds taken from different areas on your tray or drying rack - not all areas always dry evenly.*

Ultimately, count on our dry Canadian winter air to bring your seeds to the right dryness. By November, the air in your home will be naturally dry enough to make your seeds safe for [storage](#).

Until then, keep them in paper bags or envelopes until then.

Learn more about saving seeds, and how to dry each species in our handbook "[How to Save Your Own Seeds](#)".

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## Storing Your Seeds

You want to make sure that any seeds you have are properly stored so they will germinate when needed. Once your seeds are [cleaned](#) and [well-dried](#), package them into airtight containers.

Snap top mason jars are excellent for seeds, though glass jars with thicker rubber seals and metal clasps make a better seal for long term storage.

**Tip: Remember that many seed envelopes can fit inside one jar!**

By packaging the seeds on a dry day, or by running a dehumidifier in the room (bringing the relative humidity down to 35% or lower), you can effectively decrease the amount of moisture in the jar. Once sealed, do not reopen the jar as this will immediately equalize the moisture in the jar with that in the surrounding air!



## How does storing seeds work?

Seeds are living things, each with a little baby plant sleeping inside and stored food to feed that plant until it sprouts. That's the key to a seed's shelf life - it lives until it runs out of food. Old seeds don't grow because they ran out of food.

In other words, to make seeds last longer, it's important to make them consume their stored food more slowly. The deeper they sleep, the slower they eat, and the longer they live.

So, make them "dormant".

*What makes a seed dormant?*

Precisely the opposite of what makes them sprout.



<b>To germinate seeds</b>	<b>Moisture</b> triggers seeds to grow	<b>Warmth</b> triggers seeds to grow	<b>Light</b> is needed by some seeds to germinate
<b>To store seeds</b>	<b>Dry air</b> puts seeds to sleep	<b>Cold</b> makes seeds consume food slowly	<b>Darkness</b> helps keeps seeds dormant

**NOTE: Dry is most important, followed by cold and then darkness.**

Seed storage is not difficult, but it makes the difference between seeds that last for years, and seeds that refuse to sprout after only a few months.

Here's a simple trick for choosing a good place to store your seeds:

Measure the temperature in degrees Fahrenheit, and the percentage of relative humidity. If the sum of those numbers is less than 100, you've found a pretty good place to keep seeds in the open air.

## °F + %RH < 100

The lower the temperature the better, and especially the lower the humidity the better, so try these methods:

1. Put your well-dried seed in air-tight jars, and store the jars in a in one of the locations indicated below.
2. Put an envelope of silica gel (a material that absorbs moisture) and an envelope of seeds in a sealed jar for two days. The silica will remove excess moisture from the air and also from the seeds. Remove the silica to prevent over-drying, and keep the seeds sealed in the dry jar for years.

Exactly how long your seeds will last depends on many variables. Generally, bean seeds usually last for 3-5 years if they're dry and room temperatures, tomato seeds can live for up to 10 years in the same conditions, and other vegetable and flower seeds normally keep somewhere between 2-6 years.

Here are some tips to get you thinking about seed storage:

1. Every 6°C (about 10°F) of lower temperature will double a seed's lifespan (at typical temperature ranges).
2. Every 1% of moisture removed from a seed will its lifespan (to a certain point - you can fatally overdry them by using heat)
3. Seeds dried in silica gel, or very dry open air, will not be damaged by freezing. Then you can really make them dormant!
4. Remember to keep seeds in air-tight jars, because the humidity is higher than you think.

## Where to Store Your Seed Containers

Here are six good and bad places to store your seeds during the winter.

### In the basement. (NO)

Usually, basements are fairly humid. Even if they are finished, most basements don't have the same ventilation as the upper floors of a house so moisture from the walls can enter the air.

### In the fridge. (NO)

Fridges are cold, but they are also very wet and humid and therefore don't make great places for storing seeds. Even chilly seeds will expire fairly quickly if kept in such a humid place.

### In a heated garage. (NO)

Though perhaps a convenient place to keep seeds, they unfortunately tend to have pretty severe temperature fluctuations at the door(s) are opened and closed in everyday life. This leads to condensation on all surfaces, including the seeds.

### In air-tight containers in the

### In a main floor closet. (YES)

### In an unheated garage or shed.





### **basement. (YES)**

Even if the basement is a bit humid, the dry air inside the containers plus the cool downstairs temperature should help the seeds to last. Glass jars are ideal for this, after the seeds have dried for at least a month.

The main floor of the house might not be as cool as the basement, but it is almost certainly drier. Since dry is more important than cold, a dry closet is a really good place.

### **(MAYBE)**

Sometimes, an unheated garage or shed is a good place since changes in temperature are gradual outdoors. For this, ensure the seeds are completely dry and in glass jars.

There are a lot of places where you can store seeds successfully, as long as you focus on DRY, COLD, and (to a lesser degree) DARKNESS.

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