

Growing From Seed

By Horticulturist Sam Maupin

Growing plants from seed is a way for gardeners to participate in a natural cycle that is efficient and beautiful. Seeds are the most inexpensive and easiest way to buy or trade plants, and the plants they grow will likely generate more for next year. It is not always easy to grow our favorite plants from seed, but with practice, the process helps us to better understand our plants and gardens. By collecting and saving seeds, we have the opportunity to fine-tune our plants to our individual needs, and this ability should be considered the highest level of gardening.

Every spring, seeds are cheap to buy in any hardware store or garden center, and are available through catalogs and online at any time. Although they are easy to come by, it is not always a sure bet to know what you are getting. To limit uncertainty, look for seed packets that present a year of harvest and germination percentage. Buying seeds that are grown regionally usually helps ensure that they will be adaptable to your garden. Confidence in your supplier comes with experience. It is important to consider that plants like Mediterranean herbs might be more difficult to grow from seed than varieties that are naturalized to cool, moist climates like we have in western Washington. Notice which weeds you always have popping up, and it is likely that their more desirable relatives might be easy-to-grow, too. If the plants we grow are able to make seeds that we can save, it proves that they are well-suited for our gardens.

Starting seeds in late winter or spring is a seasonal ritual that is guided by hope and optimism. Success is dependent on experience and luck. It is easy to get ahead of ourselves by ordering and sowing more than our gardens can handle, or starting the process too early. Seedlings are like babies that need protection from harsh weather, but they also need space and light to grow up strong. When grown indoors, seedlings will quickly stretch and get soft, so it is important to be expecting favorable weather for transplanting after they germinate. In Washington, this might not come until June for most of our summer crops. Directly sowing seeds outside allows them to come up on their own terms when the weather is favorable. Many growers use moon cycles as a calendar for timing sowing dates and improving germination rates. Various degrees of technology are available for starting seeds, but volunteer plants that come up in our compost piles and weeds that sprout all-year-long are a testament to the idea that starting seeds can be a very low-input endeavor.

Seeds are the original known currency, and they literally grow on trees. Just like some financial investments, the value of some seeds is a facade. Hybrid seeds are very popular because they have specific desirable characteristics, however, they will not produce true-to-type offspring. Heirloom and open-pollinated seeds can be collected and stably re-grown year after year, as long as are not cross-pollinated. To improve the likelihood of success when seed-saving, it is

best to harvest seed from a broad selection of high-quality, mature fruit. Cleaning, drying and labelling collected seeds is also very important, although it does not require any equipment beyond what is in an average kitchen. Even if there are some hiccups along the way, saving seed is fun. Once you get the hang of it, the varieties we save will begin to improve every year as they become better suited to our individual gardens.

Historically, most people farmed or gardened, and the vast majority saved seed from year to year. This time-honored tradition gave us the plants we enjoy today. Our culture is completely dependent on this legacy, although the perceived inconvenience of growing our own keeps most of us from building on it. By growing and saving seeds, we have the opportunity to improve the health and productivity of our gardens and develop new varieties with amazing potential. As Thomas Jefferson once said, “the greatest service which can be rendered in any country is to add a useful plant to its culture.”