

## Save Seeds from Your Favorite Ornamentals

*By Rachel Oppedahl*

I read an article recently by an avid gardener who said, “Collecting seeds is one of those activities that makes me feel like a wealthy woman ... By the time I’m finished in fall, I will have shelves stuffed with the makings of next year’s garden.” For free, I might add.

Starting many annuals, perennials, vines and even some shrubs from seeds is surprisingly easy. And gratifying. Whether you’d like to propagate a single, favorite plant; create big swaths of another, faster; or simply avoid having to buy the same flats of flowers from a nursery every spring, saving seeds is great option.

Here are some tips for getting started:

**Go for the easy ones first.** Because they’re generally more prolific at producing seeds, annuals are often the easiest to gather. But there are also perennials that are relatively easy to propagate by seed, so if you’d like to have more of a beloved perennial, it doesn’t hurt to try. Whether they’re from your yard or a friend’s, seeds from plants like California poppies, cosmos, zinnias, Four O’clocks, columbines, coreopsis and coneflower are a good place to start if you’ve never tried seed saving before.

**Watch your plants for seed formation.** Plants will set seeds at different times of the growing season depending on when they flower, so it pays to regularly spend time in your garden to observe them. Deciding when seeds are mature enough to collect varies with different plants, too, but just takes practice. Some plants, especially those with microscopic seeds, make it a little tricky to time a harvest. Other plants make seed gathering so easy it’s almost funny. Four O’clocks form leaf cups around spent flowers that hold big, fat, black seeds that fall out at the slightest touch.

Resist the temptation to pick seed heads right after the flower petals fade. You want to give them time to ripen. They need the living plant to nourish them as they grow to full size. If the plant has seed pods, wait until you can see them swell from the seeds fattening up inside. Another way to tell if it’s time to gather is if the seed pods have dried and are beginning to split.

**Store seeds with care.** If you plan to save seeds rather than planting them right away, make sure to dry them before putting them in a container. The best way to do that is to spread them out on a sheet of paper or paper towel and let them air dry for several days or several weeks, depending on the humidity in the room. Master Gardener Vera Strader has a great tip for determining when seeds are dry enough for storage: “If you put some in a sealed glass jar and condensation appears inside the jar, they need further drying.” Once you’re sure the seeds are dry, remove any chaff and store them in a cool, dark, dry place in a glass jar with an air-tight lid, or in a sealed envelope. And don’t forget to label them!

When you're ready to start your seeds for next season, look to resources like the *Sunset Western Garden Book*, the UCCE's California Garden Web (<http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/>) or the California Native Plant Society (<https://www.cnps.org/>). Different plants require different chill requirements, planting depth and early care.

Just think: If you can fill your garden by collecting seeds from your, and friends' plants, you could put the money savings into pavers or new patio chairs! Not to mention the pleasure that comes with seeing those little green leaves rise from the soil in spring.

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*UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: [http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master\\_Gardeners/](http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/) You can also find us on Facebook.*