

Heirloom Seeds and Plants

at Strawberry Banke Museum



Heirloom

Heirloom seeds hold both historic and genetic significance. They connect us to the past and those who collected them through antiquity. Heirloom seeds came of a time before hybridization. They are seeds, which have developed through a process of natural selection and thus reflect the needs and ideals of the generations that gathered and preserved them.

Because these seeds are open pollinated, they can still be gathered and saved by home gardeners. This enables the gardener to save seeds from the earliest, most productive or flavorful produce, the sweetest flower, or the plant best adapted to the soil and climate of a particular region.



Hybrid

Hybrid seeds, on the other hand, are developed by crossing strains to create plants with desired characteristics (such as uniform growth patterns and simultaneous maturation for ease of harvesting and shipping). Genetic standardization may have benefits for the commercial grower, but risks the loss of potentially valuable characteristics and genetic diversity. Home gardeners and developing nations are not able to save the seeds of hybrids, as they will degenerate into wilder strains. Hybrid plants are genetic clones and thus if one plant is blighted the entire patch will come to be. (The Irish potato famine and more recent threats to American corn crops exemplify the need to maintain genetic diversity) Because heirloom plants are open pollinated and genetically diverse, a crop could not be wiped out in its entirety and the gardener will always be able to collect the seeds with the strongest traits for the next year's garden and for future generations.

Our Quest

The Historic Landscapes Department seeks out and grows historically and regionally appropriate heirloom seeds as a part of its organic gardening program. Our quest for accuracy is weighed equally with the desire to preserve the genetic material found in these open pollinated / heirloom varieties for future generations. Our living collections are based in seed and pollen analysis, surviving examples in the museum collections, primary sources from the region, pictorial evidence and oral histories which have been utilized to recreate and restore the gardens you find throughout the cultural and historic landscapes at Strawberry Banke Museum.



How to Save Heirloom Seeds



General Seed Saving Information

Save only the seeds from your healthiest plants and those that exhibit the traits that are desirable and expected for the heirloom you are growing. Remember that it is always worth experimenting and trying to grow plants from generation to generation.

Before you store your seeds, make certain that you have thoroughly dried them. Use a screen, paper bag or basket to dry your seeds. For especially damp seeds like tomato or cucumber seeds can be smeared along the side of a paper bag, left to dry and folded for storage. With any plant there is a limited window of time to gather the best seed. Harvest seeds before they ripen and they will never grow. Wait too long and they will be carried away by the wind and the birds. Remember that in the process of open pollinated seed selection, you would be choosing the healthiest, most vital seeds, as well as selecting for desirable traits such as high yield, sweetness, and early harvest as well as the conditions of your own back yard and the shorter growing season here in New England. Separate seeds from the chaff, which can decompose in the storage process. This can be done by breaking open husks/seed pods, or gently running the seed heads through your hands or a screen.



Storage Considerations

Seeds should be clearly labeled, dated and stored in a dark, dry place. Storing seeds in paper bags or paper seed envelopes can be the best method for preserving seeds as any moisture remaining can dissipate and not lead to seeds molding (this can be one of the greatest challenges to the novice seed saver). One of the best places is on top of a refrigerator. Others would suggest a cool and dry place as working best. If you are certain that your seeds are fully dry they can also be stored in glass bottles, wooden boxes or similar storage containers. Be certain that seeds are free of moisture before storing them or else they will rot in the container.

Some Thoughts On Seed Saving From The Past

- “Gather all your seeds, dead, ripe and dry.” Lawson, *The Country Housewife’s Garden*. 1618
- “For the seeds let them be gather’d when they are full ripe and kept not above a year, for afterwards they decay” Cole, *The Art of Simpling*. 1657
- “Seeds must be gathered in fair weather, at the wane of the moon, and kept, some in boxes of wood, some in bags of leather, and some in vessels of earth, and after to be well cleansed and dried in the sun or shadow; otherwise, as onions, chibols, and leek, must be kept in their husks.” Markham, *The English Housewife*. Best ed.
- “...and this also ought to be done on a clear and warme day...so that they ought not to bee gathered when any raine, moisture, or wet dewe is on them, not being then drie parched with the heate of the Sunne, nor raine and cloudie day, for any of these doe much hinder the keeping any time their vertue. Also they ought to bee gathered, when they bee full of juice and fresh, and that not the smaller or bigger are chosen, but the meaner, and such besides which fall not to withering...and dried in the shaddowe, in a place toward the South, not being moist and defended from the dust and smoke, and for the better defending and preserving of them, to be put up in bagges close bound at the mouth, and in boxes for that use.” Hill, *The Arte of Gardening*, 1608
- “A beggarly account of empyie boxes, Green earthen pots, Bladders and mustie seeds. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (v.i. 46) 1592.
- “The tomato is one of the few vegetables of which it is worthwhile for the amateur to save his own seed. For that purpose select the finest fruits from the thriftiest plants that have made the best showing from start to finish. The source of the commercial supply of seed is not always what it should be. Some of the big canneries have installed machinery by which the seeds are separated from the pulp and these are sold to seedsmen. Since good, bad and indifferent tomatoes go into the cans the seeds are of the same degrees of worth and worthlessness.” (Selden, *Everyman’s Garden in Wartime*. 1917, 176. New York)