

LTPL Seed Sharing Library

Choosing Crops for Seed Saving

Easy Crops

If you are a beginning seed-saver, the easiest plants to grow are self-pollinating crops that mature and produce seed in one season. These crops are called annuals, and include beans, peas, lettuce, tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, and okra. There is always a small chance that cross-pollination with other similar crops could occur, so if you are saving seeds to share or sell and want to maintain purity, you should use one or more of the techniques in the Intermediate crops section that follows.

Intermediate Crops

These crops are annuals that produce seed in their first year, but they will readily cross-pollinate with other crops of the same species. This group includes broccoli, cucumbers, spinach, squash, pumpkins, corn, melons, and Chinese greens. Special techniques have to be implemented to make sure that the seed strain is kept pure. One method is to hand-pollinate the flowers and then tie the blossom shut or put a bag around it to keep out insects or wind-blown pollen. This is most often used with vining plants with large blossoms such as squash, melons, and cucumbers. You can also isolate the plant from others of the same species by using distance or vegetative barriers, timing (growing varieties that bloom at different times), or by growing only one variety of a species at a time. This works best with crops that are grown in large plots such as corn. The third option is to make a cage or row cover out of fine-gauge netting or screen and cover the entire plant or planting, which is fine for more compact plants such as broccoli and spinach. Remember you do not have to cover, tie or bag every flower of every crop, just from the plants from which you are saving seed.

Advanced Crops

Biennial plants grow vegetation the first year, remain in your garden over the winter, and set seed the following spring or summer. Plants that are not winter hardy in the north, like many cabbages, have to be lifted, stored, and replanted in the spring. Because these are also cross-pollinated crops you may also have to be mindful of other plants of the same species that are blooming at the same time. Seed from many of these crops are viable for 2-5 years so you can alternate saving crops year to year. Biennial crops include beets, chard, parsnips, carrots, celery, onion, turnips, rutabaga, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, and kale.

Please note: Cross pollinating different cultivars on purpose or gathering seed of undetermined parentage is fine if you are experimenting for your own seed supply, but please refrain from contributing seeds to the Seed Sharing Library unless you have taken the above precautions.