



Why Seed Gardens?

A seed garden can supply seeds for local gardeners, seed swaps, and local seed banks. (If you don't have a local seed bank or regular seed swap, check out the Seed Matters show-to guides.) A dedicated seed garden allows you to grow more seed and to save seed from crops that are difficult to grow in a backyard garden. For example, one gardener might not have space to grow 30 carrot plants to seed, but a dedicated seed garden can handle larger plant populations. Shared gardens come with the joys and the challenges of collaborative work; in this guide, we'll share some tips that can help you maximize the joys and minimize the challenges.



How to organize Community Seed Gardens

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Seed saving can occur in any garden, but a community space dedicated to seed creates amazing opportunities beyond what any single seed saver can accomplish.

A visible and vibrant community space:

- Educates people about the life cycle of plants
- Demonstrates the process of seed saving
- Informs and inspires residents about the value of revitalizing local seed systems as the foundation of local food systems

A shared seed garden preserves heritage varieties from season to season while passing knowledge from generation to generation.

A community seed garden is similar to community gardens dedicated to growing food for the hungry: The focus is on benefiting the community, and the group works together rather than on individual plots. Instead of offering food to the community, a seed garden offers hundreds of seeds for people to grow their own food.



Planting the Seed for a Community Seed Garden — Recruiting and Organizing

Recruiting Collaborators

The first step is to introduce potential collaborators to the needs and benefits of a seed garden. While community gardeners can eat the fruits of their labors — a benefit that often draws eager participants — the satisfaction and importance of growing seed frequently requires vision and education. Here are a few ideas for getting started:

- Host an event with community-minded friends and have a speaker or show a movie that emphasizes how a robust seed culture strengthens local food culture.
- Look for opportunities to collaborate with existing garden projects or organizations such as school gardens, established neighborhood gardens, or a nearby seed bank or library.
- Find a devoted local group of people who can offer input and resources early in the planning phase, and who can continue helping in the garden throughout the year.
- Consider enlisting people who have access to special equipment or infrastructure such as the following:
 - › A greenhouse or other indoor site for starting seedlings
 - › Garden tools and materials
 - › Storage space for tools and for processing seeds

Organizational Structure

Develop a system that keeps people focused and engaged but isn't so burdensome that it causes them to lose inspiration. Start by setting up a decision-making process. Who will make decisions? Will it be the whole group, a committee, or a single person? The following list of responsibilities will help you think through the structure and decisions that need to be made:

- Legal matters concerning the property, lease, and insurance
- Coordination and scheduling of work parties, volunteers, meetings, and regular garden maintenance
- Primary contact for neighbors, police, or members of the public
- Financial management and budgeting
- Fundraising and/or membership
- Managing the seed inventory and distribution of seed

• Membership

Community seed gardens that aren't part of an existing garden or group will need to decide if they're a membership group or not. Some gardens are open to the public and allow anyone to participate, but a core group makes decisions. Other gardens are membership based: members pay a fee to participate and cover costs, care for the garden, and share the seeds among themselves.

Places and groups for collaboration, volunteers, donations, or finding a garden site:

- Local seed swaps
- Garden clubs
- Community organizations like SlowFood or Transition Town
- Agriculture groups
- Churches
- School gardens
- Master gardeners
- Community gardening groups
- Seed companies
- Nurseries



Putting Down Roots — Planning Your Seed Garden

Choosing Seed Crops

Discuss what your community wants to grow, as well as which crops are suited to your area. Your choices will determine the size and site of your garden. Engage garden members in answering these questions:

- What crop types grow well and can produce viable seed in your climate?
- Do you want to grow a wide range of crops or concentrate on a few that are difficult for the individual gardener to grow, such as crops that need larger populations and a larger space?
- Will you grow only seed of food crops, or will you also grow seed of fiber, medicinal herbs, or flowers?
- Do particular crops or varieties have historical importance in your area?
- Are certain crops rare and in need of preservation?
- Will your crops be harvested for food as well as seed?

Saving Seed and Eating Too!

It's not easy watching your food crops go to seed without getting a taste, but there are ways to have your seed and eat it too. First, it's always better to grow more plants than you need for seed; select the ones you want to save seed from, and enjoy eating your culls! Second, you can eat and save seed from some crops:

Winter squash — the final eating product is full of seed.

Tomatoes — separate the seed and sauce the rest of the fruit. **Peppers** too — just separate out the seed from a mature pepper.

Green beans — harvest some along the way and let some dry to seed. Dry beans can be both food and seed.

Leafy plants like **lettuce, kale, chard, arugula,** and **mustards** — harvest some of the leaves and then let the plant go to seed. Just remember, the leaves create energy for the plant, so harvesting too many will lower your seed yield, as well as the quality and vigor of the seed.



Choose Your Varieties and Source Your Seed

Decide which varieties best fit your criteria and priorities (each community will be different). Ask seed savers in your group if they have extra seeds of these types. Search for seeds at seed swaps or other local seed projects. Remember to use sources like the Seed Savers Exchange yearbook (the group's local members may want to work with you). Buy seeds from quality sources and try to buy organic seeds.

We recommend conducting trials that enable the group to see the similarities and differences among varieties of the same crop, or even among the same variety (for example, there are dozens of varieties called French Breakfast Radish, but one may be better adapted to your area). Trials allow you to assess varieties for your climate and needs, and to prioritize varieties for saving. Let's say your group has pickling enthusiasts who want to save cucumber seed:

- Choose five or six cucumber varieties from your seed sources (catalogs, local grower recommendations, and so on) and grow them out (ideally at several home gardens in addition to your community garden).
- As they mature, evaluate how well they produce, how they handle disease, which flavor is preferable, and any other criteria you choose.
- Have a special day when you invite gardeners to walk through and record notes on what they like or don't like.

Participants get to see genetic diversity at work, and this information will help you to rank and prioritize your most important local varieties. Organic Seed Alliance has a free variety trial publication on its website (www.seedalliance.org). It's more formal and detailed than a garden group needs, but it's excellent and you can scale it to your project.



Site Selection

Finding land for a community seed garden is similar to finding land for any community garden. The American Community Garden Association's website explains how to select a site and provides useful advice about insurance, leases, and material needs. You can find this information at <http://www.communitygarden.org/rebeltomato/roots/pick-a-site.php>.

When selecting a seed garden site, consider the following:

- **Size** (depends on several factors):
 - › **Number of seed crops** you'll produce each season.
 - › **Minimum population size** needed to maintain an adequate gene pool. (See the Seed Matters Seed Saving Chart for crop-specific population sizes.)
 - › **Spacing needed** for mature plants. (Remember, plants going to seed often take up more room than they do as a food crop. A beet gone to seed can be five feet tall and three feet wide!)
 - › **Space dedicated for food harvesting** if you're integrating edible crops into the garden.
 - › **Isolation distances** between varieties of the same species to prevent cross-pollination.
- **Isolation:** Varieties of the same species can cross-pollinate, producing offspring with new characteristics. While this is great if your group wants to do a plant-breeding project, it's a problem for seed savers working to conserve specific heritage varieties. To keep seed varieties "pure," seed savers create "isolations," where they plant related varieties that are wind or insect pollinated (often called "outcrossers") at appropriate distances to minimize the chance of crossing.

Insect and wind-pollinated crops, such as different varieties of kale or corn, must be planted at least a half mile apart (or have some physical barrier like a mesh cage to repel insects).

Self-pollinated crops, like peas and tomatoes, have flowers that usually need very little isolation to prevent crossing (but insects do burrow into self-pollinators, so maintain some distance between varieties).

We recommend that you learn which are self-pollinators (have a look at the Seed Matters Seed Saving Chart) and start with these plants since they are easier to save seed from.

If you integrate seedbeds into an existing vegetable garden, pay close attention to whether your seed crops could cross-pollinate with nearby food crops. Check out what your neighbors are growing for other possible sources of cross-pollination. An isolated site can minimize potential problems.

- **Buildings:** An on-site greenhouse, a hoophouse, or another covered area can be useful as an initial storage facility for seeds when curing (finishing their maturation, fermenting them, and/or drying them). Keep seeds from molding during this phase by ensuring adequate airflow, and be sure to protect them from animals, especially birds and rodents, which can quickly eat your harvest. For long-term storage, select a cool, dry indoor space. If you don't have a space at your garden, ask a member to take the seed home to dry.
- **Irrigation system:** Choose an irrigation system that allows you to control the water flow to each bed independently, because each crop will have specific needs depending on timing of maturity. You'll want to stop watering a crop once it's fully mature and beginning to dry. For vegetable crops like lettuce that produce dry seeds (unlike the wet seeds of melons and tomatoes), overhead watering during seed maturity can result in seed diseases. Drip irrigation with a valve on each bed is the best system.



Sprouting — Running Day-to-Day Operations

Once you have a site, a crew, and a plan, it's time to start gardening! To accomplish your goals, plan on a combination of occasional work parties and day-to-day or weekly responsibilities. We recommend a **timeline** to outline the priorities throughout the season, and a **weekly schedule** to accomplish all the important details. Building community while getting the work done strengthens the group supporting the project, so organize the work as much as possible with groups, not individuals. Regular work includes the following:

- Watering (think about automating this)
- Weeding
- Pest management
- Staking and pruning

Work Parties

There are busy times of year when you will want to organize a work party to get a lot done. A potluck meal and/or invited musicians can enliven these work parties and help build community. Consider organizing work parties during these times:

- Bed preparation
- Sowing and transplanting
- Hand pollination
- Harvesting and processing
- End of season cleanup and cover cropping
- Special events like building a hoophouse or raised beds

Communication

The larger your group, the more practical it will be to have a system of communicating with every garden member — they'll all appreciate being kept in the loop about progress and decisions. Consider which option will work best for your membership: an email list, a phone tree, meeting times, an Internet group, or a workbook or message board in the garden. It should be someplace where people can share progress, updates, priority to-dos, schedule changes, and special announcements.

Clear Signage

Make a sign explaining that the plants in your garden are being grown for seed. This is especially important if you're sharing space with a community food garden, since people may think that your crops are going to waste and harvest them, destroying your intended seed crop (trust us, this happens!). Signs can also clarify what's planted in beds, dates planted, and crops that need watering or harvesting.

As seeds near their harvest time, they suddenly can mature rapidly and shatter, so it's important to monitor the crops every couple of days. Drying, cleaning, and processing seeds can take place later in the winter months, inside a covered area on-site or at members' homes.

Planting Schedule

The best date to sow your crops varies from species to species (and even variety to variety), and planting for seed crops requires different timing than planting for food crops. Until you've done this a few times, you may have to learn from trial and error since there's no singular rule of thumb (luckily, mistakes can be educational). Consider the following when developing a planting schedule:

- **Days to seed maturity:** Most plants need more time to produce mature seeds than to produce food, so figure out how early you need to plant seeds to get a seed harvest.
- **Starting early:** Starting seeds indoors when outdoor conditions are still too cool can provide the head start some crops need to reach maturity in some areas. The exact timing for starting seeds and transplanting will vary from region to region depending on temperatures and risk of frost.
- **Staggering plantings:** One way to avoid cross-pollination is to stagger your plantings. For example, you can grow two varieties of corn if you choose an early-season variety and a late-season variety, or plant similar varieties a month apart if your season is long enough (northern climates rarely give you this type of flexibility, but in the south and coastal west this can often be done).



Make sure everything in the garden, in storage, and in your records is well-labeled — the beds, the bags where plants are drying, the jars and envelopes where you store seed (immediately!), and the map that shows where crops are planted. Remember that the goal is to pass along not only seed but also information about the seed.

Draw a Garden Map

A map is essential for outlining how much space each crop will need, creating isolations, and determining ideal placement of crops. The spacing needed for each crop can determine how you build, prepare, and arrange your garden beds — in rows, blocks, quadrants, or raised beds. Corn, for example, needs a minimum of 100 plants (200 is better) to maintain variety integrity, and it should be grown in blocks (not long rows) for ideal pollination.

As you create your map, assign crops to the appropriate beds based on issues of population size, pollination, sunlight, crop rotation, and where trellises and stakes will need to be installed. A map supports good record keeping and crop rotation, and it can help communicate to members about the plants that need attention.

Record Keeping

Good records are essential. The information you gather within a season and from year to year, combined with ongoing observation, will enable you to continually improve your efficiency and quality in seed saving. Write notes and take photographs to document different varieties, to show the history of the garden's development, and to record the garden's progression through the seasons. Make a file for each variety so that members can write their observations and track the following details:

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|---------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| • Name/s | • Soil amendments added | • Size, shape, color, and flavor of fruits |
| • Source | • Isolation distance | • Soil conditions, pests, diseases, and other conditions found in the planting area |
| • Planting date | • Number of plants | |
| • Germination rate | • Time to maturity for harvest | |
| • Spacing of plants | • Time to maturity for seed | |

Also keep records of the weather (frost dates, rainfall, and high temperatures) and any unusual events that affect the entire garden. It's good to check back records so you can see how different conditions influence how varieties grow from year to year.



Transplanting — Sharing Your Seeds

What do you do with your seed after it's harvested, processed, and ready for storage? Share the seeds with your community, and share your success stories too. Seed savers and gardeners in your community and across the country could learn from your experience.

Spreading Seeds

Sharing your seed harvest with other gardeners is a welcome way to continue an age-old tradition of passing seed on and expanding seed diversity into new regions. Decide among your members how you want to distribute your seed harvest, including how much to share and how much to keep in storage. Here are some options:

- Let garden members take seed home to share with friends and family.
- Connect with a local seed bank, seed library, or other community seed project and offer to add seed to their inventory.
- Host a seed swap.
- Sell seed packs to raise money to cover garden expenses or to benefit another good cause.
- Become a member of Seed Savers Exchange and add your varieties to its annual yearbook.

Spreading Information and Inspiration

A community seed garden is a dynamic living classroom for educating garden members and the public. As plants go to seed, the garden often will take on a wild look that encourages questions. Use this attention as an opportunity to disseminate information about seed saving, or invite outside educators into the garden to give presentations and inspire more people to get involved with community seed projects.

Network with other community gardens; they may be interested in creating a seed saving program modeled after yours. This can create a network of community seed gardens that coordinate with one another to grow different varieties and share harvests, creating a more robust community seed collection.

Remember, seed grown in a community for the community strengthens the local food system by creating a local source of seed. Gardeners who grow, gather, and share their knowledge, food, and seed are the foundation of local food systems. The work that you're doing is part of a seed saving history that goes back thousands of years, and it's essential for a healthy and sustainable food future!



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