Seed Saving

The planning stages for vegetable seed saving should start in the spring. Since this may be an afterthought, ask yourself these questions before saving seed from your garden this year.

1. Is this variety a hybrid?
   It is not recommended to save seed from hybrid (F1) varieties because they will not produce plants like themselves. Seeds produced by hybrid plants will have various characteristics representative of its parentage. This inconsistency is not desirable for saving seed.

2. Is the crop an heirloom or open-pollinated variety?
   If yes, is it self-pollinated or cross-pollinated?
   Open pollinated varieties are more likely to produce plants like themselves making it safe to save seeds from these types of crops. Open pollinated crops are categorized as self-pollinated or cross-pollinated. Beans, lettuce, peas, and tomatoes are self-pollinated. Self-pollination occurs when pollen transfer occurs within the same flower or plant. Self-pollinated crops can be grown near one another without fear of unintentional hybridization.

   Cucumbers, melons, squash, and corn are cross-pollinated. For cross-pollination to occur pollen is moved from flower to flower by insects or wind. It is important to know the difference so that different varieties of cross-pollinated crops are not planted too close to one another. This will prevent unintentional crosses from occurring in that seed lot. If the crops you are growing cross-pollinate then it is best to plant just one variety of these to prevent hybridization. To confuse the issue even further, not all, but some species of cucurbits can cross with each other. For example, ‘Jack O’ Lantern’ pumpkins can cross with zucchini, squash, and ‘Acorn’ squash. However, they will not cross with ‘Hubbard’ squash or ‘Big Max’ Pumpkin. So if you have multiple species of cucurbits in the garden do you research to insure that cross-pollination cannot occur between those species before saving the seed.

3. Only harvest seed from healthy plants with fully mature fruit.
   Seed should be selected from plants that display desirable characteristics, such as ideal color, growth rate, disease resistance, heat tolerance, and yield.

Turkey Gizzard Heirloom Beans

Millie Davenport, ©2015 Clemson Extension
Seeds are cleaned differently depending on whether they are dry seeds or wet seeds. Beans, peas, and okra produce dry seed. To allow the seeds to fully mature it is best to let the pods dry and turn brown on the plant before harvesting. After harvest, place pods in a well-ventilated area on a piece of cardboard in a single layer to dry. All pods should be properly labeled at time of harvest.

Tomatoes, squash, melons, and pumpkins have wet seeds. Allow the fruits to fully mature before harvest. Summer squash are typically harvested and eaten while still immature. Squash fruit are ready to harvest for seed when they have a hard surface that is unable to be dented by a fingernail. Scoop or squeeze the seed into a clean container. Add water to the seeds and allow it to ferment by sitting at room temperature for several days. Stir the seed mixture daily. The seeds that sink to the bottom of the container are viable. Spread the viable seed on to a paper towel to dry.

Store dried seed in an envelope, paper bag or glass jar. Be sure to label all containers with plant variety and year harvested. Store in a cool, dry location like a refrigerator.