

## All About Seeds

Woohoo! Got my Rare Seeds Catalog in the mail!! Spring is just ahead! This is what it actually sounded like in my head as I typed that:

\*sigh\*... no it's not... there's snow on the ground and blizzard warnings

Yes! Yes it is!

\*shrug\*... if you say so... but I've got a window that says it's not

And I've got a calendar that says it is! Now shut up and take your vitamin D!

Ok, internal monologue notwithstanding, I thought I'd share some insight on seeds... where to get good quality heirloom seeds (not those abominations at the big box store\*), seed storage, starting from seed, and harvesting seed.

\* I put a little asterisk next to big box store for a reason. That reason is because these large commercial chains are fairly responsive to the whims of its customers. They are somewhat agile in this regard. They have to be or they'd be out of business. As a result, I am seeing the occasional rack of heirloom seed. However, I'd still rather play it safe and pick mine up from a reputable dealer that specializes in non-GMO heirloom seeds.

Now, my wife would take issue with the term non-GMO... she's a biologist. To her, all seed has been messed with and therefore all seed is Genetically Modified. Here's the rub though... included in that broad generalization or categorization, for her... as a biologist, is hybridization. Man's been doing that to seeds for hundreds of years.

I want pink flowers! Ok. I'll cross pollinate a red flower with a white flower and after a few generations and some trial and error to find the best, most suitable plant candidates, I'll give you a pink flower.

The above example may be an over simplification of her argument, but to a scientist this matters. To a lay person who wants to; plant his garden, know where the seed was sourced from, know where his food came from, and eventually harvest seed for the next crop or the next year, hybridization and Genetically Modified are two completely different definitions, as they are to her. She recognizes and acknowledges these differences... she just wants me to be careful when I throw around the term 'non-GMO'.

The best way to differentiate between hybridization and Genetically Modified is one is naturally (somewhat) occurring and the other is not. Adding pesticides, herbicides, weed killer, cells from a puffer fish, etc. to the genetics of a seed is not natural and is therefore classified by me in my lay terms as GMO. Cross pollinating a plant to get a different variety of plant in terms of color or size naturally occurs in nature all by itself. Therefore, it is NOT Genetically Modified by today's standards.

Cripes! I've gone off the rails... this might be multiple posts... anyhoo, back to seeds.

**Seed Procurement:**

Now, regardless of whether or not you are already well endowed with seed and are merely looking to try something new or you are just starting out, the following companies have either been used by me personally or come highly recommended to me:

- My Patriot Supply: <http://www.mypatriotsupply.com>
  - I used this company as a primary source of seed when I was starting out. I highly recommend picking up one of their many seed 'vaults' to get going. Over the years, I've picked up their 'Survival Seed Vault', 'Culinary Herb Garden Seeds', and 'Salsa Garden'.
- Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds: <http://www.rareseeds.com/store/>
  - I've used Baker Creek (Rare Seeds) as one of my secondary sources of seeds when I've been inclined to try something new or that My Patriot Supply hasn't carried... plus they are the ones that send out the big catalog every year. I'm currently trying out their 'Inchelium Red' and 'Sinnamahone' garlic varieties.
- The Seed Guy: <https://theseedguy.com/>
  - HUGE selection of seeds just like Baker Creek. Highly recommended.
- High Mowing Organic Seeds: <http://www.highmowingseeds.com/>
  - High Mowing has an excellent selection of, as well as extremely useful information regarding, cover crops. Cover crops are important as they serve two purposes. They prevent soil erosion AND they put nutrients back into the soil naturally. This means few chemicals, pesticides, and herbicides. I'll talk about this stuff later...
- Burpee: <http://www.burpee.com/heirloom/>
  - My dad loved these guys so they are more of a sentimental inclusion. However, they do carry a limited selection of heirloom and organic seed.
- Stark Bros: <http://www.starkbros.com/>
  - The Stark Bros (Brothers) site has a wealth of information on berry plants. It's extremely important to understand not only what will grow in your cold hardiness zone, but also the care and maintenance of the berry plant year after year. Read everything they have to offer in their 'Growing Guide' section.
- Seed Savers Exchange: <http://www.seedsavers.org/>
  - This is an interesting site. They carry a wide variety, but have also included the ability for site visitors to exchange seeds. Personally, the 'Certified USDA Organic' label is slapped on their site a little too much for my taste.... I just don't trust the governmental alphabet soup. However, I know of many folks of similar mind that have used and recommend the exchange. I prefer to know EXACTLY where the seeds came from. That's just me.

Now that you've got your seed, how do you store it so it lasts?

**Seed Storage:**

That's easy. Find someplace cool and dark. This is especially important for bulb (flowers, garlic, and onion) and root/tuber (potato, sweet potato) varieties. Most seeds will keep for a year or two if stored correctly. My Patriot Supply, and some of the other suppliers, store and ship their seeds to you in vacuum sealed pouches. This will add another couple of years to the shelf life. If you're homesteading or off-grid and eschew shopping in general, seed storage is vitally important.

But how do I harvest seed from my current crops for the following year?

**Seed Harvesting:**

This takes practice, patience, and whole lot of trial and error. You've heard the term, 'Gone to seed'... well that's a lot easier said than done. Anyone can let a plant go to the point where it produces its own seed. The trick is knowing when to harvest. A lot of your herbs, flowers, medicinal plants, etc. will produce seeds you can actually see. Fruits and vegetables not so much. A lot of times, those seeds are inside the fruit and need to be dried. Well, technically, all seeds need to be dried.

For the seed producers that you can see, what I like to do is gently shake or wiggle the plant. If even one or two seeds become dislodged, I harvest.

For the fruits and vegetables, what I've found is as follows.... Leave the plant on the vine for approximately 7-10-14 days longer than you normally would if you were harvesting to eat. Carefully open the fruit and gently pick out each seed. Any seed nicked with knife, I discard. Clean and dry the seed and let dry on a paper towel.

Ok, I'm lazy and going to cheat at this point.... Here's the URL for wonderful site that will aid you in your understanding of seed harvesting: <http://www.seedsave.org/issi/904/beginner.html>

Now that you've harvested and stored your seed, spring is just around the corner. How do you start a garden from seed?

**Starting Seeds:**

I have a six foot folding table and a grow light in my basement. Along with my table and grow light, I have a timer and two heat mats. That's it. I do, however, highly recommend the Hydrofarm brand (<https://www.hydrofarm.com/>). I had an issue with a ballast going out unexpectedly and they shipped me a new one, no questions asked. Oh, and I tried to get the old one fixed, ya know, because why not, but the repair was greater than the cost of purchasing a new ballast. Bum deal...

Now, on or about March 1 of each year, I buy a bag of organic dirt and some peat and mix them together in small batches. Add a little water as you mix. You want moist dirt, not mud pies, so only add enough water to make the dirt barely sticky. I'm in an urban environment and therefore space is somewhat limited.... Well until I get the green light to sell the girl's trampoline that is! Then I'm gonna go crazy!! So, for the time being, I'm only growing about two dozen plants in total. Of those two dozen, I'm growing about one dozen different things.

I start my seed in the biggest biodegradable pot possible given my limited table space. I use 3" and 5" Jiffy pots. I do this because transplanting can shock the plants so I like to do that as little as possible. The seed being started determines what size pot. Larger vegetables like tomatoes, peppers, zucchini, eggplant, and squash are usually in the 5" pots. I do this because I want them as big as possible in the two months they're under the light before I put them in the ground. Cucumbers, basil, rosemary, and onions I'll usually relegate to the 3" pots simply because of space considerations.

Plants need water. If possible, I'll catch some springtime rain water to get them a good head start over municipal water. As for fertilization while under the grow lights, I've only ever used 'Bonnie Plant Food'. It's a liquid 8-4-4 fertilizer and it's natural. I fertilize according to the manufacturer's suggested timetable which is every two weeks for indoor plants. Once they are outside and in the ground, they get it every 7-10 days. Every year I've been rewarded with 7' to 8' tomato plants and a ton of produce. It mixes with a 1 T per gallon ratio.