

How to store seeds at home

Growing plants from seed can be one of the great joys of life. Seeing those little green seedlings start to emerge from trays in the basement while it's still snowy and cold outside fills me with hope and reminds me that greener days lie ahead!

Growing from seed has other benefits as well. It can give you a greater range of vegetable varieties to choose from; help you cherish that memory of the flowers growing in your mom's garden; or help you better appreciate the amazing adaptations of native flora. Whether it's field crops, vegetables, garden flowers, or native plants, plant seeds are bundles of potential.

These mini miracles of spring are made possible, in part, by proper seed collection and storage habits. Whether seeds are collected from a garden or rural acreage, or bought from commercial sources, they can be stored for one or many years of future fun.

Seeds generally stay viable (have the ability to germinate) longer if you **keep them dry** and **keep them cool**.

These conditions are adequate for the vast majority of seeds (though there are always exceptions) and can usually be easily achieved in most homes. If your home has a basement, it can be a great location to store seed. If not, a cooler room in your house



will work just fine. Some folks even store seed in a container in the fridge.

If you have none of those, just park them on a shelf indoors—they may not last quite as long, but most seeds are not really that picky. Wyoming's dry climate is a benefit when it comes to saving seed; in other parts of the country, growers have to worry about humidity decreasing the life span of their seed.

Things you *don't* want when storing seeds include dampness, high humidity, and high temperatures. The goal is to keep your seeds in a dormant state, so think about the things you add to make them grow (water, light exposure, warmish temperatures)—and then avoid those. Seeds are alive; they respire

and perform other physiological processes in storage. You want to keep them from kicking into gear and using up their resources before it's time to plant.

Label carefully

Unless your memory is much better than mine, you'll want to make sure your seed is stored in labeled containers. I generally use coin envelopes to store the seed I collect myself. These little envelopes are made of paper or glassine (a glossy, clear-ish paper). Note that glassine envelopes typically do not have a gummed edge that can be dampened and sealed, so you'll need a paper clip or tape to make sure they're securely closed.

Of course, there are alternatives: old letter envelopes, cleaned-out pill bottles, tea sampler tins, and so on. Occasionally I find seed I squirreled away in a clean Kleenex because that's what I had in my pocket at the time. (I try to transfer these to something more durable *before* I accidentally throw them away!) If you're feeling creative, origami-like folding can be used to make seed packets from used sheets of paper.

Next, label the envelope (or equivalent) with a pencil or permanent marker. I typically include what type of plant it is, where I got it (in case I want to



Penstemon flower seed (dark specks) that still needs to be cleaned of plant debris.

get more someday), and the year I collected it. Then, place the sealed envelopes into a larger container—a big Ziploc baggie, plastic storage bin, cookie tin, glass canning jar—whatever works. Finally, place the container in a cool location.

If you are storing seed in the refrigerator, where humidity can be higher, or in a more humid basement you might want to throw in a silica packet to make sure the seed stays dry.

Collection tips

If you collect your own seed, there are a couple of things to remember.

Collect seed when it's mature. As seed matures, it will often change color and may be hard when you press your fingernail into it.

Let it dry! In Wyoming, this can usually be accomplished by just letting it sit out for a while to air dry. Seed that is still moist when it is placed in a container may mold in storage or age faster.

Clean any debris (bits of stems, leaves, seed pods) out of your seed before you store it. This will expedite the drying process and make it easier to plant.

Seed lifespans

Seeds naturally have varying lifespans. For example, many onion varieties have seed that only reliably lasts for a year, whereas cucumber seed may last 5 years or so. If you *really* get into seed saving, do your research. Seed from some plants should be kept moist rather than dried, for example, and stored for as short a time as possible. However, dry and cool conditions will work for most seeds you are likely to handle.

Some of our native plants (and weeds, unfortunately—bindweed, I'm looking at you!) have evolved to have their seed last many years. For some seeds, germination actually improves with age, up to a point. When I pulled out some penstemon flower seed that I had collected over a decade ago, it germinated great—possibly better than when I first tried to germinate it!

For more information on the estimated lifespans of vegetable seeds, check out the University of Nebraska – Lincoln publication “Vegetable Garden Seed Storage and Germination Requirements” at <https://bit.ly/unl-veg-seed-storage>.

Seed storage is not difficult. Give it a whirl! You'll expand your plant growing horizons and those little packages of life will brighten your days as you wait out the last of winter.

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Jennifer Thompson is the small acreage outreach coordinator for the University of Wyoming Extension. She delights in outwitting Wyoming's fickle spring weather by starting seeds in her basement.

It's alive! (Or not...)

Been storing that seed for a long time and don't know if it is alive anymore? There's a simple way to tell. Dampen some paper towels with water, then sprinkle some of the seeds on them. Roll them up or fold them over so the seed is covered by towel on both sides. Stick the paper towel packages in a Ziploc or other waterproof container and put them on a shelf in a warmish room (70–80°F), out of direct sunlight.

Every couple days, peek in and see if the seeds have started to germinate. Generally, you'll first see little white roots poke out of the seeds, then the tops emerge. If nothing has happened in a couple weeks, your seed is either dormant or dead. If only half of the seeds germinated, you know that you'll need to plant twice as many to get the number of plants you want.

For more information on saving seed and growing plants from seed, visit the *Barnyards & Backyards* “Gardening” page at <https://bit.ly/BB-gardening> and “Native Plants” page at <https://bit.ly/BBNativePlants>.