



ask SAM

Dear Sam,

I have some leftover seed I bought 3 years ago. On the back it says sell by 11/22. Is the seed still good?

*Thanks,
Claire*

Dear Claire,

This is a great question and a common misconception about what appears to be an expiration date on seed. This date is simply an indication of how old the seed is. A seed packet that says “sell by 11/22” probably has an additional marker on it that says “packed for: 2022,” meaning the seed was harvested and tested, and a specific germination (sprouting from the seed) rate was determined based on that test. For that germination rate to stay accurate, it needs to be sold within that year.

Seed life span varies, but 3–5 years is a good estimate for a lot of flower and garden species. Of course, there are examples of some lasting longer and some less. Pelleted seed, for example, generally has a shorter lifespan.

As seeds age, their germination rate declines. The rate may stay stable for the first year or two, but by year 3 the rate may have decreased from 97% to 75%.

A germination test is the best way to determine if seeds are still “good.” Place some seeds on a damp paper towel and place the paper towel in a zippered plastic bag. It’s helpful to label the bag with the date and type of seed, especially if you are conducting multiple tests. After a couple days at room temperature, open the bag and damp towel. If the seed has sprouted (germinated) and the sprout looks healthy, that’s a viable seed. You can estimate the overall germination rate based on how many seeds in the test were viable.

Proper seed storage can help immensely with keeping seeds viable. Keeping seeds dry and cool is critical. For more tips and tricks on successful seed storage, visit <https://bit.ly/bb-seed-storage>.

Happy planting!

—Sam