Collecting Seeds
by Elda Brown
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As our gardens begin to fade with the approach of cooler weather, this is a great time to think about perpetuating their vitality by harvesting seeds to be saved over the winter. Whether you grow flowers, vegetables, or herbs, seed collecting can add a new dimension to your gardening experience.

"By picking the best seeds from your best plants you improve your stock," says Scott Owen who supplies seeds to Sow True in Asheville from vegetables grown at Friendly Farms in Penrose.

"Growing plants from seeds can be a great hobby. It is a whole new way of enjoying gardening. Like the monks of old you can create your own strains and try to hybridize your own plants," says Owen.

But harvesting vegetable seeds can be tricky. For one thing, you have to be conscious of the other crops growing nearby. Queen Anne's Lace is the same species as the common carrot, for instance, and may cross-pollinate so that carrots grown from the resulting seeds will not be true to the variety with which you started. Planting distance varies for different crops. Peppers, for example, require 500 feet for safe isolation between varieties. Consult an expert resource, such as the agriculture extension service, to determine the planting distance for any vegetables you plan to grow for seed.

Collecting flower seeds is fairly easy. All you need are some paper bags, a marker, some small, sharp-tipped scissors for nipping the seed pods, and a basket or container with a handle to hold everything while you work.

Collect flower seed when it is dry outside: A sunny afternoon is best. One way to tell if the seeds are ripe is if the pods have changed color. Typically they are brown, not green, when ripe. When the capsule begins to split they are ready.

Use the sharp tipped scissors to cut the pods or seed heads and place them into your collecting bags. You'll find the seeds wherever the flowers were. Don't forget to label the bags as you go.

Place seeds in paper, not plastic bags. Seeds can easily spoil if they
are not dry before storing. Plastic impedes the drying process. Spread them out on newspaper to air dry. Once they are dry, store in paper envelopes labelled with the name and date collected. I use the return envelopes that come with those unwanted mail solicitations and an old shoe box to hold the envelopes. Seeds need to be stored in a cool (about 40 degrees), dark place during the winter.

It sounds like a lot of work, but once you grow your first plants from the seed you collect, you will be hooked. Last year I harvested seeds from the pods of a beautiful orange butterfly weed (Asclepius tuberosa). This year I grew six new plants from seed. Since the parent plant I harvested the seed from had died, it was very gratifying to have those identical "replacement" plants. But, if you happen to produce a hybrid from a seed that was cross-pollinated, trying to figure out the mystery of the parentage can be almost a fun as admiring your new plant.

**Gardening Tasks for September**

- Plant pansies and flowering kale for fall color.
- Plant herbaceous perennials, container-grown trees and shrubs.
- Divide peonies late in month. Cover buds with two inches of soil and then mulch.
- Continue to spray rose bushes.
- Seed cool season lawns now. Use six pounds of seed per 1,000 sq. ft. of lawn.
- Fertilize cool season lawns with one lb. nitrogen per 1,000 sq. ft..
- Core aerate cool season lawn if needed.

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*Do you have a question for the Transylvania Extension Master Gardeners or a subject you’d like to see addressed in this column? E-mail us at manymoons@citcom.net or have your garden questions answered at our telephone clinic from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Wednesdays, March through October. Call 884-3239 or walk-in during those hours at the Community Services Building, 98 E. Morgan St. The Transylvania Extension Master Gardener program is sponsored by the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service: www.transylvania.ces.ncsu.edu.*