

Seed saving and viability times

The following is a seed viability list that has served me well for the last 15 years, with no disappointments, for open pollinated (non hybrid) seeds produced in my garden. Just remember as you are near the end of the viability time to check the germination rate by putting 10 seeds in a damp paper towel, roll up, and check in 4-5 days or so and see how many have sprouted. These times are applicable to purchased nonhybrid/open pollinated seeds and IF vac-packed and stored in the freezer will greatly extend the viability times.

Seeds with 3 year viability include: Lima beans which produce seeds their first growing season. Just let the bean pods dry on the bush, shell out, and store in a dry, dark place. Cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower and carrots will only produce seed their second growing season so you need to be able to overwinter then somehow. It is recommended to have at least 10 plants of the variety winter over in order to have good strong seed, but I do it with 3 or 4 plants and have had no problems. I just bury the mature plants in straw/hay to overwinter, then uncover in the spring, except for the carrots which will be discussed next. The cole plants will send up a stalk and produce seed heads which you will harvest when they turn brown. Just cut the heads off, shake the seeds out on paper, let air dry for a week, put in envelopes or jars and store in a dry, dark place. Carrots can be wintered over in the ground provided the ground doesn't freeze and mush the carrots or you can gently dig up the whole carrot, put in an old ice chest lying sideways, covered completely with sand. Seal the ice chest with duct tape. In the spring replant closely and stake. The seed stalks for carrots will reach 3-4 feet high with large lacy flowers at the top. When the flowers turn brown, cut the seed heads, bring in, shake over paper, dry for a few days, and store as for the others mentioned above. Sweet corn has a life span of 3 years also but has seed that first growing season. Just leave the ears on the stalk until the first frost or so then harvest the ears and store the seed on the cob until needed for planting. Lettuce has a 3 year span also producing seed in the first year's growing season. It bolts! That is producing seed. Watch the seed stalk carefully and when it starts to turn brownish, I usually put a knee high nylon around it and I manage to catch most of the seeds. Store as all others.

Seeds with a 4 year viability, first year seed production include: Green beans and all drying type beans and tomatoes. These can be viable longer but the germination ratio goes down dramatically each year after 4 or 5. For beans it was recommended to have two 25 foot rows, but that is more beans than I plant. I seem to be able to get by with about 10-12 plants. Just let the beans dry on the plant until hard and dry, harvest the pod, shell the beans out, and store as above. Tomatoes take more work to save the seed. Harvest the VERY best tomato you get, slice off the top, scoop out the seeds and pulp, put that mess in a bowl covered with water and set aside. You must let this ferment in order to get the seed to germinate next year. After it starts to look gross, scummy, moldy scoop off the scum, rinse the remaining stuff and spread out on waxed paper to dry. When dry you can separate the seeds from the pulp remains. I have planted Roma tomato seeds that were 8 years old and had 80% germination which isn't too bad.

Seeds with 5-6 year viability, first year seed production include: Radish and field corn. Be ready to stake the radishes as the flower stalks get 4-5 feet high with what looks like miniature bean

Pods on them. Let dry on the stalk until you can hear the seeds rattle in the pod, harvest, shell out, and store. Treat field corn the same as sweet corn - dry on the stalk, store on the cob.

Seeds with 6 year viability, first year seed production include: All squashes, pumpkins, chards, beets, eggplant. For saving seed from the squash and pumpkins, scoop out the pulp containing seeds, spread on waxed paper to dry, then separate the seeds out and store. Chards will produce really tiny pods with tiny seeds. Treat the same as the radishes and store the same. Beets will have a single flower stalk and produce those funny looking seeds. Check daily in order to catch the most seed or cover with a small sack or knee high nylon to catch the seeds. Eggplants should be treated like tomatoes but I'm not sure if you need to ferment or not. They are in the same family as tomatoes. Anyone have this experience?

Seeds with an 8 year viability, first year production include celery, cucumbers, and melons. I have no experience with celery. Let the cucumber turn yellowish on the vine, scoop out, dry the pulp, separate the seed, store as above. Same for melon varieties.

Seed viability unknown, first year seed production: Asparagus. Asparagus comes in male and female plants. The female plant will produce neat red berries which when dried on the plant will produce really tiny seeds. It's best to start these inside and set out where they can grow for 20 years. They are perennials and will produce yearly.