

Seed Exchange FAQ

From *Perennial Notes*, Newsletter of the Wisconsin Hardy Plant Society, September 2002

What is a seed exchange? Exchanging seed is a time-honored tradition among gardeners. We collect ripe seed throughout the growing season. In late fall or early winter the seeds are brought or sent to a central place and distributed to those who want them.

When should seeds be collected? Collect seeds all season long! The first to ripen are ready NOW (as I write in mid-May). Pay attention to those developing seed pods as you stroll about your garden. Pick seeds as soon as they are ready or the plant, the wind, the birds or the chipmunk will disperse them. Wait too long and the seeds will be gone.

When is a seed ripe? As you watch the fruiting structure develop, be it seed pod, capsule, seed head or berry, it will expand and change color, becoming darker as the seed ripens. The seed, too, will darken. When ripe, the seed will be hard, so that you are not able to easily crush it between your fingers.

What should I collect seeds in? Anything that will contain them and allow them to dry. An open dish, glass, jar, envelope or paper bag will do. I am partial to envelopes. Lots are available in junk mail solicitations. When the seed is dry, envelopes are easy to seal up. The envelope is labeled, of course, as soon as the seeds are put in.

How should seeds be stored until exchange time? Traditional advice is to store them in a cool, dry place. Mine do fine on the bookshelves in my living room. A major exception to this advice is for seeds of most early woodland wild flowers, such as Dutchmans Breeches, Hepatica and Trillium. These seeds should not be allowed to dry out and require special storage conditions.

What sort of seeds are best to collect for sharing? Bring seeds of plants that people ask for, from plants you want lots of—and don't want to pay \$5 apiece for, from plants that don't divide well or spread too slowly, reseeding annuals and short-lived perennials. Keep in mind that seed of named varieties and hybrids will, in general, produce plants that differ from the parents. Seeds from an unnamed species will come true.

How many seeds should I collect? A little bit of seed goes a long way. A teaspoon of primrose seed is enough for 25 people. Collecting into a letter size envelope will prevent over collecting.

How should seed be prepared for a seed exchange?

At minimum, bring seed, clean or not, in a labelled container. It is desirable to have more information about the plant—common name, scientific name, cultural requirements, appearance, why you recommend this plant.

What is seed cleaning and why is it done?

Seed cleaning is the process of separating the seed from the other bits of plant material (chaff) collected with it. Removing chaff aids seed longevity by removing seed-damaging insects and fungi and keeps seed drier, as chaff tends to attract moisture. Cleaning also vastly reduces the volume of material to store and makes it possible to know how much seed is present. Most national exchanges require seed to be clean, so it is a good skill to learn. It can also be fun devising ways to separate all those little bits.

How is seed cleaned?

Begin the process by separating the seed from its pod or cluster. Shake it, crumble it, rub it over a screen or coarse surface, crush it with a rolling pin—do anything that works. Then shake the seed/chaff mix through sieves and screens of various sizes held over a collecting box. Sometimes the seed will fall through and the chaff will be left on top. Sometimes the reverse happens. When a seed/chaff mix cannot be separated by size, it can probably be separated by taking advantage of weight differences. Place the mix in a shallow box, such as a shoebox lid. Blow very gently at the mix. The chaff, being lighter, should blow off. Another approach is to place the mix at one end of the box. Raise that end about 30 degrees from horizontal, and gently tap the box. The seed, being heavier, generally falls to the lower end of the box. Blowing gently while tapping will keep the chaff at the high end of the box.

—Ruth Cadoret