Saving Seeds

By Kathleen Cue, Nebraska Extension Horticulture Educator

Long before the advent of seed catalogs, gardeners saved seed from their prettiest, tastiest and most promising flowers and vegetables of the gardening season, discarding the seeds from the blah, the unattractive and the poor producers. In essence, gardeners have helped mold the shape of gardening selections, making them some of the earliest purveyors of genetic modification.

Today, the farm-to-table movement has generated new interest in the time-honored practice of seed saving. Before starting seed saving, there are two concepts that are worth knowing and understanding.

First, hybrids don't come true from seed. You've probably heard this hundreds of times but for the uninitiated, this means the original seeds were the result of two inbred lines of parents. Called F_1 hybrids, the resulting seeds will showcase the best characteristics of each parent. Once seeds are saved from an F_1 hybrid, however, the mix of genetics means the manifestation of all kinds of characteristics, some worthy and some not. If the idea is to save seeds from a hybrid, then the expectations should be to simply see what arises, more like an experiment.

The second thing to know about seed saving is that some plants are wind-pollinated, others insect-pollinated and still others self-pollinated. Examples of wind-pollinated plants include beets, corn and spinach. Examples of insect-pollinated crops are carrots, eggplant, melons and peppers. Peas, beans and tomatoes are some of the few self-pollinated plants. Knowing how plants are pollinated will help determine the spacing of vegetables in the garden to minimize crosses arising from pollen arriving via air currents or insects.

So let's apply these concepts. Say you'd like to save the seed from a 'Celebrity' tomato. Because it is self-pollinated this seems like a sure thing. Bear in mind it is a hybrid, however, with the resulting progeny showing some fruit characteristics of the parent and some not. So saving and planting the seed from a 'Celebrity' tomato would be better approached as an experiment. An older variety of tomato like Black Krim comes from an inbred line and would be a better choice for saving seeds as it will likely produce tomatoes like the parent plant.

I once went to a farmers market where an orchard-grower was selling an apple variety at a considerably higher price than others on his table. When asked, he responded that he hand-pollinated the flowers from one tree with the pollen from a different tree. His belief was that he created a cross and the resulting fruit exhibited characteristics of both parents. While it is true he created a cross, this introduction of new genetic material would be in the seed itself, not in the fruit.

Compost piles are interesting places to see what crosses have taken place the previous growing season. Muskmelons with characteristics of both a gourd and a melon are common, indicating a pollinator has moved pollen from the flower of one plant to another.

For more information on seed saving, check out this website: http://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/saving-seed-7-602/ .

Interested in finding out more about the Nebraska Extension Master Gardener program's 2019 Dodge County classes? Plan to attend one of two informational meetings in November:

November 15, 5:30 pm, Nebraska Extension in Dodge County, 1206 West 23rd Street in Fremont

OR

November 16, 1:30 pm, Nebraska Extension in Washington County, 597 Grant Street in Blair.