A Guide to Saving Seeds from Your Native Plant Garden

This guide is based on notes from Michael Skinner's 2023 course Restoring Native Prairie as well as email correspondence with him. https://www.skinnernativeseeds.net/

You have planted and tended native seeds and plants, they have taken hold, and to your delight they've bloomed. Soon they'll be setting seed. You would like to save some, perhaps to start some more plants or to share with friends and family.

Here are a few tips to help you in this process.

Before the season starts:

- Identify what you want to collect before the season starts. You may want to start with just a few species your first year of saving.

As plants start to grow and blooming begins:

- Visit your site often during flowering and then once every week or so to monitor seed development and to ensure you know what the seed looks like.
- Usually there's about 6 weeks from full flower to seeds ripening. The hotter and drier it is the more quickly seeds ripen. When it is cold and wet this will take longer.
- Watch seeds closely for signs they are ripening such as colour change, stems drying, seeds beginning to shatter (refers to the natural shedding of seeds when they are ripe).
- The closer to shattering that you collect seeds, the better germination will be.
- Some seeds continue to ripen after clipping the seed head.
- If the first seeds of a plant are falling off, you are ready to go.
- There is not a big window for harvesting, perhaps a few days if the seeds are not quite shattering.
- If three quarters of the seeds are ripe you can clip them.
- If the seeds are pretty green, it will be a week or two until they ripen.
- If seeds feel soft to medium, there are about 5-8 days till ready.
- If you squish the seed and it doesn't break it is ready.
- If seeds pull off plants with no resistance, they are ready. If you have to pull them out, not quite.

Some tools for gathering

- Snips – small snips for clipping stems and seed heads.
- Buckets or small pails – windproof so seeds don't blow away. Heavy enough so they don't blow over if you set them down. You can use paper bags but weigh them down if you set them on the ground.
- Containers that breathe in the sun – do not leave seeds in a container that doesn't breathe in the sun, i.e., a plastic bag.

- A pen, pencil, or permanent marker to label your container holding seeds as soon as you pick them.
- If you are not going in right away, stash in the shade out of light and hot sun; an open container works well.

Drying

- You need to dry the seed before you can clean it (if at all) or store it.
- Lay out as thin as possible. Move it around now and then, flip it.
- You can leave seeds on a screen (a window screen is fine) as long as the mesh is fine enough they won't fall through or you can make a window screen frame. If seeds are small you can put them on a tarp, a piece of cardboard or some other firm surface.
- Put them in a place where they won't be disturbed or be in danger of blowing away.
- You can place them in the sun.
- Label your seeds when they are drying.
- Dry for about 3 weeks.
- Store in a cool dry place.

Cleaning

- Will reduce the volume and can be labour intensive. The amount of cleaning you do will vary with the seed. Some will not need it.
- Large volumes can be dusty. Don't clean seeds in an area with sparks or open flames. Wear a dust mask and eye protection.
- Chaff (bits of the outer layer of seeds, leaves, stems, etc.) doesn't affect anything other than storage volume. You can leave leaves and chaff.
- If more than 50% is seed, stop cleaning.
- It is important to know exactly what the seed looks like and that you are not looking at the seed coat or pods. Know what you are trying to clean down to.
- Caution: You can break seeds.
- If you cannot get the seed out of the seed pod easily, plant it in the pod.

  For seed ID see: Nora Stewart's book, *Cultivating Our Roots: Growing Authentic Prairie Wildflowers and Grasses* (doesn't include all seeds).

Storing seeds

- Seeds do not live forever in storage.
- Dry and cold are the most important factors for longevity.
- When storing above 0 degrees C – use breathable bags, like paper or envelopes. Sealed bags can get mold.
- Below 0 degrees – The best storage is mason jars with silica packets, the second best is vacuum sealed bags, and the third is doubling up on Ziploc bags with silica packets inside.

- The colder and dryer it is the longer the seed will be viable.
- If containers are not sealed properly, seeds may get freezer burn and that lets in humidity. Adding silica packets will help but aren't foolproof if the container is not properly closed.
- Seeds will not live long term in the freezer. Use as quickly as possible. Every species is different when it comes to seed storage. Generally, freezer seeds should retain most of their viability for 5 years if they are very dry when stored and in a sealed glass container.
- Room temperature and relatively low humidity should be fine for most seeds for up to 2 years. Keep out of the light.
- Do not store in the fridge. Every time you open the fridge humidity increases.