

How to collect native seeds

Pollination of a single plant can yield thousands of seeds, all of which have the capacity to become mature plants. Collecting and sowing these seeds is environmental stewardship. You shorten supply chains, reclaim natural heritage, create green space, and offer next year's insects more food and shelter!

You will need:

A garden with flowering plants
Work gloves
Garden shears (optional)
Brown paper "coin" envelopes or paper bags
Permanent marker for labelling

1. **Find a garden** with a plant you'd like to harvest seeds from. In New England, seed harvesting takes place from September through November. Be kind when harvesting seeds and remember to thank the plant for sharing seeds with you.
2. **Look for seeds where the flowers used to be.** Flowers turn into fruits, inside of which are seeds. Fruits do not have to be colorful and juicy; many of the ones in your garden will be dry and brown (think: acorns) or fluffy.
3. **Know what you're looking for.** Some seeds like those of mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum*) are dark and tiny like poppy seeds. Others like milkweed (*Asclepias*) are broad and flat. Images of seeds for native plants can be found on prairiemoon.com.
4. **Check to make sure the seeds are ripe.** You know they are ready when they pass the "thumbnail test" and are hard enough so that they cannot be dented with your fingernail.
5. **Extract the seeds from the plant.** You can use a variety of methods: shaking or beating the dry seed heads into a paper bag works well. For bigger fruits (like those of milkweed *Asclepias* spp.) you might have to crack open the fruit and manually pull out the seeds. You can also cut off the seed heads into a bag to extract the seeds at home.
6. **Collect seeds from different plants into individual containers.** Avoid mixing seeds during collection; you can always combine them later if you'd like to make a seed mix.
7. **Label your bag or envelope with the date, location, and species.** Let the seeds dry out in the bag at room temperature for two weeks. Then, store your seeds in the refrigerator until ready to sow.

TPI Tip: starting a pollinator garden from seeds is more challenging than starting a pollinator garden from mature plants. If you are a first time pollinator gardener, we recommend that you start with already established plants that you can pick up at a nursery or our summer plant sale. Your garden can later be supplemented with plants grown from your harvested seeds.

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When collecting seeds, keep the following in mind:

1. **Timing is key.** Some fruits from spring-blooming plants mature in late summer, others mature after frost. Harvesting seeds too early will result in poor germination rates; if the seed can be dented with a thumbnail, it is not mature. Harvesting seeds too late and you risk predation by birds and rodents.
2. **Know how seeds are dispersed. The easiest seeds to harvest are those that are dispersed mechanically by the plant.** You can typically shake or beat the ripe seed heads into a container to harvest seeds from these plants. Some examples are:
 - black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*)
 - partridge pea (*Chamaecrista fasciculata*)
 - purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)
 - mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum* spp.)
 - wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*)
3. **Other seeds are dispersed via the wind.** These seeds are also easy to collect, but come attached to a cottony fluff that can make harvesting difficult if not timed right. You can dislodge the fluff from the seed by shaking the seeds in a sealed plastic bag with a few quarters. Some example of plants with seeds dispersed via the wind:
 - common milkweed (*Asclepias* spp.)
 - wood asters (*Symphyotrichum* spp.)
 - new York ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*)
 - goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.)
 - thistles (*Cirsium* spp.)
4. **Last, some seeds are dispersed via animals.** These seeds are more challenging to collect as they are typically encased within sweet, juicy flesh. Example of plants include black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*) and shrubby dogwoods (*Swida* spp.) Third-party instructions for harvesting these seeds can be found on our website.
5. **Harvest only from your garden or with explicit permission from neighbors.** Never harvest seeds from wild plants—intense pressure from seed collecting can deplete a local seed population quickly, especially of rare plants.
6. **Share your seeds with others!** Many native plants produce thousands of seeds in a growing season. If you only plan on sowing a small fraction of your harvest, sharing your seeds with others can be a great way of increasing the impact of your garden.



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