



Feature Article – “Savoring Seeds”

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Today was a beautiful Florida winter day with the highs in the upper 70's. With temperatures like that you would almost think that our weather might just get back to normal but I am not quite willing to call it just yet. I have heard through the National Weather Service-grapevine that temperatures will not stabilize until April. This does not mean that the weather will not get warmer, just that we need to be prepared for some cooler temperatures that might be out of the ordinary for that time of year. This should not prevent you from starting your garden though. Just be aware of temperature fluctuations that could damage young seedlings and make sure that you protect them accordingly. Seed selection is one of the most favorite things to do; there is always some excitement in the mystery of how seeds germinate and grow. Some gardeners would never think of buying seedlings or plants in a garden center and they spend much time selecting the right type of seed, planting it and watching the seedling poke its tiny hypocotyl hook through the soil. Personally, I enjoy starting my garden plants from seeds too, but quite often I miss the window (February-March) to plant my seeds and I have to purchase the plants from a reputable garden center. There is nothing wrong with this and not one method is better than the other. You just have to be aware that seeds take longer and waiting too long might push your garden into the hot and humid summer when the plants are more susceptible to pests and diseases. Whichever method you chose, you are on your way to producing fresh and delicious produce for you and your family to enjoy, with the added benefit of knowing exactly what went into every vegetable.



Starting from Seeds

The main advantage of starting with seeds is that there is a greater selection of types and varieties to choose from, so many in fact that it is sometimes hard to make a final selection. As many different types of gardeners there are, that is how many different types of seeds you can find. The selection is endless ranging from dwarf corn to striped tomatoes, seedless watermelon to yard-long green beans, and deep purple carrots to gourds with prickly spines. The most important factor is to select varieties that are adapted to our area and to make sure that the seed is of good quality. Seed should be bought from a reputable dealer that orders their supply fresh each year. On the back of each seed packet you should see “packed for 2010” or “sell by 2010”; this will ensure seed freshness and viability. If you have seeds left over from previous years, or if you purchase seeds from a discount store, they probably will

not have been packed for the 2010 season. You can still try and use those seeds but the germination rate will be determined by how those seeds were stored. If they were stored in a cool, dry place, such as your home, they probably will germinate. But if the seeds were stored in a garage or warehouse that was not cooled, then the seeds will have a lower germination rate which can be very frustrating. Since, for the most part, seeds are not very expensive, buying new ones for this season would be well worth the money. You do not want to waste weeks waiting for seeds to germinate only to find out that few, if any, were going to come up.

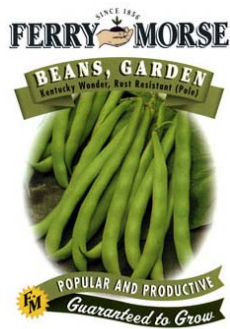
There are two main types of vegetable seeds with regard to pollination; open-pollinated and hybrids. Open-pollinated seeds come from plants that cross pollinate or self-pollinate. Cross-pollination takes place in a population of plants via insects, birds, wind or other mechanisms. Self-pollination is when the male and female parts are in the same flower or male and female flowers are on the same plant. Many gardeners like using open-pollinated varieties not only because they can collect the seeds for next year, but because these seeds have not been genetically modified by commercial science. A disadvantage to open-pollinated plants is that characteristics can change slightly from plant to plant and even generation to generation. But open-pollinated plants increase biodiversity and also help plants naturally resist many pests and diseases. Examples of cross-pollinated plants are corn and squash, and self-pollinated ones are beans and tomatoes. Heirloom varieties are also open-pollinated and are seeds that were commonly grown before the advances of conventional, large-scale agriculture. Do your research though and make sure that the varieties that you select are appropriate for our area. Refer to the Planting Guides from the University of Florida at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/VH/VH02100.pdf>. For non-hybrid (open-pollinated) varieties that you have grown in your garden you can save the seeds from one year to the next. Make sure that you select seeds that are in near-perfect condition and store them in a cool, dry place until the next year's planting season.



Hybrid seeds are the seeds taken from a plant that had two different parent plants of the same species; the reason for doing this is to accentuate particular characteristics that are desirable for some reason. Some of those reasons might be tolerance to a specific pest or disease, a taller or shorter plant, sweeter fruit, etc. Many of the seeds that you will purchase are going to be hybrids, in fact, the majority of the seeds in the consumer market are going to be hybrids. This is because the plant and seed companies recognize that these specific traits are important to the gardener and they are going to make sure that their seeds create the garden experience that you are looking for. The planting guide referenced in the previous paragraph can help you select the right type of variety for each vegetable that you would like in your garden. If you want to buy only heirloom seeds look carefully on the package and it should have it written very predominately on the bag. If it does not, then it is safer to assume that the seeds are hybrids and that you need to keep looking for the heirloom types that you want.

## Purchasing Vegetable Plants

For those of you that have less time and/or patience, the home garden center consumer market has made it very easy for you to select your vegetable plants and have in the garden on the same day. When selecting your plants, once again you need to make sure that they are appropriate for your area. Most garden centers are going to order plants that will grow well in our area but you can never take too many chances and a little research goes a long way. Since you already have had your garden soil tested for pH, you should know what will grow well in the area that you have selected. Choose plants that are healthy-looking with bright green leaves. Check the soil in the pots to make sure that the plants have been watered regularly and the leaves don't have any chew marks from unseen pests. Pull the plant away from the pot slightly to make sure that the roots are not overgrown and crowded in the potting soil. Do not purchase any plant that looks wilted, faded, discolored or diseased. Once again, buy from a



quality retailer that is known for having healthy, disease and insect-free plants. All pots should be identified correctly as to the type of vegetable and what type of hybrid (i.e., tomato "Big Boy"). Some potting labels will have additional information for planting, watering and fertilizing. Pay close attention to these instructions and you will have a great crop from which to collect your harvest. Additional information on the label can tell you if your plant is resistant (therefore a hybrid) to any specific insect or disease. This is very important in our hot, humid climate where pest problems abound. Talk to the garden center personnel and have them explain to you what other information is on the label and make sure

that you are purchasing the plant that will grow best in your conditions. Once you have selected your seeds or plants you are on your way to enjoying the fruits of all of your labor.

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