



# Saving Lettuce Seeds

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Lettuces are one of the easiest vegetables to save seeds from. The seeds stay true to type, meaning that plants grown from collected seeds will be exactly like the parent plant, plus Lettuce seeds are easy to harvest and they will keep for years.

## Choosing lettuces to save seeds from

Choose healthy lettuce plants that have no signs of disease and have reached maturity by early summer at the latest. A healthy lettuce will produce over a thousand seeds that can be stored for up to five years so there is no need to save the seeds of every variety you grow in a season.

## Labelling and staking

Most lettuce varieties have distinct shaped leaves that easily identify them but as lettuces begin to go to seed their leaves change shape and colour to a point where they look very similar to each other. So in order to make sure you know what variety of lettuce seed you are saving it is important that you label the lettuces before they go to seed.

When a lettuce plants go to seed they get taller, skinner and heavier at the top as the seed heads fill out, which makes them prone to falling over especially during windy weather. To prevent this stake and tie the plants as they mature.



LEFT: Lettuce supported with an 11 millimetre wide PVC coated metal stake. Its label is stuck in a section of 13 millimetre polypipe on top of the stake. RIGHT: Lettuce seeds ready to harvest.

## Harvesting the seed heads

As lettuce seed heads get close to shedding their seeds the heads produce cotton like fluff and the plant itself begins to dry out. My general rule of thumb is that when half the heads have flowered then all the seeds are ready to harvest. To harvest them I cut the stems below the bunches of seed heads but you can also pick each individual bud.

## Bag drying the seed heads

To make sure the seeds have fully dried out temporary place the harvested seed heads in a large paper bag or a bag made out of folded sheets of newspaper then hang them up in a dry place for two or three weeks.



LEFT: Making a seed bag out of newspaper. To do this fold and staple the sides of a folded sheet of newspaper. RIGHT: Newspaper Seed bags hung up to dry.

## Separating seeds from the heads

### 1. STRIPPING AND CRUSHING THE PLANT

Place the dried stalks with their seed heads in a large mixing bowl. Draw your closed hand along each stalk to strip the seed heads and then thoroughly crush the heads and stalks in the bowl with your hands.

While you are doing this pick out the larger pieces of stalks and leaves. Continue doing this until only seeds and small pieces of the plant are left.



Stripping the seed from the stalks.

## 2. WINNOWING THE SEEDS

Swirl the bowl in a circular motion. Because the seeds are heavier than the small plant pieces the seeds will drop to the bottom while the plant pieces will move to the top. They will also settle into a compact central cluster. Tilt the bowl on an angle and steadily blow air over the seeds and pieces of dried plant.

As the plant pieces are lighter they will be blown out of the bowl, leaving the seeds. Repeat the swirling and blowing process five or six times until you are only left with seeds.



Blowing air on the seed to remove the pieces of plant.

## Storing the seeds

Use a funnel to pour the seeds into a container with the name of the lettuce and the use by year on it. Envelopes, coin bags and tic tac mint boxes all make good seed storage containers.

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