

## **Saving tomato seeds**

by Peter Garnham

Many plants, including the tomato, have developed ways to prevent their seeds from germinating too soon. A seed that germinates too quickly will produce a plant that promptly gets zapped by the first frost. Some seeds, such as apples, require stratification – a prolonged freeze – while others protect their seeds by a chemical process.

Tomato seeds are protected by a jelly-like coating. If a tomato drops to the ground, the seeds it contains will not even think of germinating until that coating decomposes. In a natural environment, that process takes a whole winter. An additional safeguard against early germination is that the tomato seed requires a soil temperature around 60°F. (15°C.) before it will germinate. Finally, like all seeds, it requires a certain amount of moisture.

We can short-cut around this process when we want to save tomato seeds. But first, you need to understand one basic point of plant genetics. Many modern varieties of grain, flowers and vegetables are hybrids, crosses between two or more varieties. If you sow the seeds from a hybrid, you will get a plant that resembles one of its parents or another ancestor. This might be a great tomato, or it might be awful, but it will not be a replica of the tomato you started with. Only open-pollinated varieties, or heirloom varieties that have existed as a single variety for several generations, will reproduce “true” from their seeds.

**To save tomato seeds**, squeeze out the seedy pulp from a cut tomato into a clean glass jar. Add about ½ cup of unchlorinated water.\* Let it sit at room temperature for a few days. A gray-green smelly scum will develop on the surface. It will stink. Consider attaching a note to stop anyone throwing it away. Never fear, this is Mother Nature doing her thing. After about four days, you will have a disk of moldy matter on the surface of the water.

Tilt the jar and carefully remove and discard the mold. If some seeds are stuck to it, or float, discard them, too – they are bad seeds. Take a fine sieve, with a mesh smaller than the seeds, and tip the water and seeds into it. Under running water, vigorously wash the seeds to remove any traces of pulp. You can be pretty rough about this, because those little seeds are really tough. Drain the sieve, blotting the *underside* with paper towels.

Spread the seeds out on a china plate or sheet of glass. Do NOT use paper towels, because the seeds will stick and you will never get them off. Let the seeds dry in a fairly dark place, not in the sun. Every day or so separate the little clumps of seeds. They are not dry enough to store until you can crack one with a thumbnail.

Store the seeds in a glass screw-top jar. Don't forget to label it with the type of seed and the date, because you will *not* remember. Don't ask how I know this. Place it in a cool, dark place.

Congratulations – you have just become a successful seed saver!

\* Public water from the Suffolk County Water Authority is fluoridated and chlorinated. This allegedly does not hurt us, but it *will* inhibit seed germination and seedling growth. To get rid of the chemicals, fill an open container or watering can with water and let it stand for at least two hours (or overnight) before using this now-clean water for seeds, seedlings, or houseplants.