

Bluestem Breezes
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December 7, 2015

Overwintering Garden Seed

I have joked in the past that I find ways to talk about gardening twelve months of the year. And if it took a little less effort on my part, I'd actually garden through those four "off" months of the year!

To get my garden fix for December, let's discuss storing of seeds. We have all likely experienced grocery shopping on an empty stomach. That seems to be the way I feel after a long winter as I am purchasing garden seed; I bring home way too much! But, that is ok! It will keep. Gardeners typically aren't wasteful folks, so there is no reason to throw out leftover seed from this year. Let's hash out how long you can store which seeds. Here is information from K-State Specialist Ward Upham on reusing garden seed:

Seed stores best if kept in a cool, dark, dry location.

Try a zip-locked plastic bag or a plastic jar such as a reused peanut butter jar to keep seed dry.

Seed will be viable longer if kept between 40 and 50 degrees F.

Temperatures a bit lower than 40 degrees are fine as long as they are not sub-freezing. Therefore a refrigerator is a better choice than a freezer which can prove detrimental to seed longevity if there is too much moisture in the seed. Seed that has 8% or less moisture can be frozen without harm and will actually store much longer than seed stored above freezing. Seeds dried to 8% or less moisture will break instead of bending when folded. Those that have a hard seed coat such as corn and beans will shatter rather than mashing when struck with a hammer.

If your seed is not dry enough for freezing, what should you do? The easiest answer is to store your seed under cool, not freezing, conditions. Drying seeds is a rather involved process and beyond the scope of this article. However, if you would like to try, an excellent reference on an effective procedure is given in the book "Seed to Seed" by Suzanne Ashworth.

Crop groups vary in seed longevity. Use the following as a guide for seed stored under cool, dry conditions.

- Crucifers (cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli): 4 to 5 years
- Corn: 2 to 3 years
- Lettuce, endive: 4 to 5 years
- Spinach, beets, carrots and chard: 2 to 3 years
- Cucurbits: Squash, melons (including watermelon): 4 to 5 years
- Tomatoes: 4 years
- Peppers: 2 years
- Onion, parsley, parsnip and salsify: 1 year

If you are unsure of viability and have plenty of seed, there is an easy method of determining how good your seed is. Place 10 seeds on a paper towel moistened with warm water and cover with a second moistened towel. Roll up the towels and place inside a plastic bag with enough holes for air exchange but not so many that the towels dry quickly.

Place the bag in a warm place such as the top of a refrigerator. Remoisten towels with warm water as needed. After the first week, check for germination. Remove sprouted seed and check again after another week. Add these numbers together to determine the percent germination.

For additional information, visit the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse, Alma; kamayer@ksu.edu; 765-3821). For Bluestem Breezes archives, check out wabaunsee.ksu.edu.