



September is Time to Save Tomato Seeds

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

When you think about the incredible number of tomato varieties out there, one might wonder why would anyone save seeds from a particular variety when there are surely several comparable selections out there? Some special quality that you just must have stands out. For me, it is the taste. In BLTs, fresh salsas, or tomato sauce, this extraordinary paste tomato of Italian descent that was shared with me as a free seedling from my local jeweler, Bruce, exceeds all taste expectations. I've been growing it for years now and faithfully save seeds. I call it the 'Jeweler's Roma'.



Photo by dmp2023

You may have your own 'must have' tomato, whether it came from a relative or from a seed company. If it is open pollinated, you can save the seeds and replant each year without having to purchase new seeds. So, no matter how tasty, disease resistant or productive your tomato plant is, first check if it is open pollinated or not. The other option would be that it is a hybrid. Open pollinated plants come true (mostly) from seed.

Hybrids, on the other hand, are the result of a cross between 2 different parent plants. If you try to save the seeds of hybrids, you might get a tomato looking like one of the two parents or something completely different depending on any cross pollination that occurred. Hybrid varieties of tomatoes or other vegetables, flowers or other plants have many attributes to share with us gardeners. They may have greater disease resistance, a larger color range, flower forms, smaller or larger sizes, longer bloom times and other desirable characteristics. But, unfortunately,

they do not breed true if their seeds are saved and replanted so seeds or plants need to be purchased anew each year.

Tomatoes are typically wind pollinated but you probably notice that bees are often visiting the flowers so some cross pollination could occur if you plant the tomato variety you want to save seeds from right next to a different variety. For us backyard gardeners, usually if your open pollinated variety is about 10 feet away from the rest, the seeds should come true.

Pick your best looking, ripest tomatoes, both for your enjoyment and for collecting seeds. Usually when the fruit is at its peak, the seeds are ripe. Ideally you would want to save some seeds from several fruit, preferably from more than one plant. Once you bring your tomatoes inside, cut them open and scoop out some of the seeds and pulp into a bowl. Add a little water and give it a stir.

Usually, it takes 2 to 5 days of 'fermenting' for the seeds to separate from the gel that surrounds them. The warmer the temperature, the quicker the fermenting. Set the bowl out of direct sunlight and stir twice a day. Add a little more water if it looks like the slurry is drying up. You should notice seeds sinking to the bottom after a couple of days.



Tomato seeds fermenting. Photo by dmp2023

When it looks like a fair amount of seeds have sunk to the bottom it's time to drain off some of the top slurry and pick out the seeds that are at the bottom of the bowl. I just use a spoon to pick out as many seeds as I want, which is only about 20, as I only grow 2 to 4 plants each year. Then I place the seeds on a sheet of waxed paper to dry. You want to place them on something that can absorb some water like parchment or waxed paper or even paper plates but not something nonporous, like plastic dishes, and also not something that the seeds could stick on, like paper towels.

Let them dry for about 3 weeks. I store my seeds in labeled coin envelopes but you can use empty pill bottles or other similar containers. I find my tomato seeds remain viable for 2 to 3 years even

though kept in an envelop in a storage box at room temperature. Some folks keep their seeds in airtight containers in the refrigerator for longer life.

Saving tomato seeds is really pretty easy so consider doing so if you have some open pollinated heirloom varieties and you enjoy starting plants from seed. For questions on saving seeds or on other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.