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# Saving Tomato Seeds

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Nobody ever told me that farming was a glamorous way of life, and it's just as well they didn't. The first commercial crop I was ever responsible for, at my first farm job, was a field of rotting tomatoes. None were being grown for food, only for the preservation of their seeds, to be cleaned and sold to a seed company.

Each day I would gather the squishy ones with the white scum beginning to form, load them into buckets and dump them into large barrels. When they were soft and putrid enough, I would mash them vigorously with a heavy iron tamper, let them ooze for a few more days, then clean them and spread them on screens to dry. The only things that smelled worse were the cucumbers that I tackled next.

Honestly, I got used to it. But now that it is September and seed-saving time, I marvel at how much more pleasant it is to save just enough seed for a home crop of eating tomatoes, or even a modest commercial one. As long as the variety you save is open-pollinated (as most heirloom tomatoes are), they will probably breed true to seed and can be saved for the following year's planting.

Taking the best tomatoes from a number of plants of that variety will give you a good genetic mix, and they needn't be rotten, just ripe. Cut the fruits in half at their waistlines, and squeeze their seeds into a labeled container such as a glass jar. (Eat what's left!) Add several inches of water to the jar and set it aside, out of direct sunlight but in a warm spot.

A flotilla of fungal matter will form after a few days, but you may cover the jar to avoid the smell, deter fruit flies and prevent a tidy family member from throwing out the whole thing. Keep the lid loose, though, to encourage the fermentation that is the key to this little operation. The gel coating that has kept the seeds from germinating will break down, and any good, viable seeds will sink to the bottom. Stir from time to time.

After no more than five days, spoon off and discard the moldy debris on the surface, and pour off the water. Add fresh water to the seeds, stir and let them settle again. Do this until the seeds are clean, then drain them well in a fine strainer and spread them on a screen or a plate so that they'll dry quickly, out of the sun. When they are absolutely dry and are easily separated with your fingers, they can be stored in an airtight jar or plastic bag and will keep for at least five years.

If you've grown tomatoes before, you know that they germinate readily, grow vigorously and produce fruits -- and seeds -- in great abundance. The fact that tomato seeds are so easy to save makes them ideal gifts to stick into an envelope and send to faraway relatives and friends. Come spring, up will come these tiny pieces of your garden, sprung out of muck, manure, rot and decay. Not much glamour in that, but a bit of poetry, yes.

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