

THE DIARY OF A SEED-SAVER – AUTUMN’S HARVEST

It’s a lovely warm September afternoon and I find myself, not for the first time this month, harvesting dry pods of three beans I am growing especially for the Heritage Seed Library. Firstly a runner bean called Montacute. These will readily cross-pollinate so I have been careful to isolate them. I am lucky that I don’t have any immediate neighbours but I still supplied those nearby with young plants or seed back in late April. In this way I created an ‘exclusion zone’. French beans don’t readily cross so I grow several varieties. To be on the safe side however I don’t grow any two varieties of French bean within about thirty feet of each other. Some, like Ray’s Butter bean, are going crazy in my polytunnels. Mrs Fortune are drying nicely up wigwams in large pots dotted around the garden and Val’s bean are in the vegetable patch.

Although the pods feel dry I will still leave them spread out on a bench in a well-ventilated shed for a week or so before shelling them. Val’s bean have been pulled out of the ground and tied in bunches to be strung over a beam in the garage to finish drying.

Autumn is the culmination of a year’s work. Back in early February I sowed a radish called Wood’s Frame. Another HSL orphan. Dead easy to grow for seed too. From a 5 metre row I ate most of the crop, thinning until I had sixteen good-looking plants left for seed. Such a prolific flowering plant too and the bees just loved them. They grew to over two metres and required much staking to keep them from falling over. Now they are ready to harvest. What seed-savers often don’t tell you is that selecting radish seed can drive you to drink! The pods are reluctant to yield their bounty. But, unperturbed I stripped the stems and put the contents into a paper potato sack which I then beat with the back of a spade so as to break up the pods. Then came the winnowing and nail-breaking exercise of prising out the last remaining seeds. I have a 30cm shallow wicker bowl with a kink to take my thumb so I can chuck the seeds and thatch into the air, sufficient for the thatch to blow away and the seeds to return to the bowl! It’s a most satisfying pastime in the afternoon sunshine.

I am also collecting the last of my broad bean seed. Like runner beans, broad beans readily cross so, in order to keep the variety pure I have to isolate. This can be challenging if neighbours are growing different varieties but I am lucky that no one near me does. I am able to grow three varieties a year by the simple expedient of succession sowing. Last October I sowed a Syrian variety in a poly tunnel. They started flowering in early March. In late January I sowed an HSL variety, Drima, in loo-rolls in a greenhouse and planted them out under a cloche on 9th March. They began flowering in early May just as the Syrian ones had finished. Finally I sowed another HSL variety, Canadian Purple, straight into the garden on 9th April. They started flowering in the first week of June just as Drima finished, so I know my three crops remain true. The trick for all of us is to sow early and late for succession – and yes, persuade your neighbours to grow the same varieties!

So many crops are very easy to save seed from. Every year I grow a number of different peas. Like French beans they are self-fertile and don’t readily cross. However, I never grow two varieties less than 10 metres apart. Like beans, I also grow small amounts in large pots or planter as well as in the garden. Peas also dry very well on the vine, but for me the success of saving seed and keeping it viable for many years is to give the shelled peas a final dry in a large air-tight tub filled with silica gel. I have used rice as a desiccant too, but with silica I know that I get a consistent result. If seeds aren’t perfectly dry they will soon rot and can spread disease and infection.

The trick with storing and preserving all seeds, whether home saved or purchased is to keep them dry and cold. To that end, for small amounts, envelopes in an airtight Tupperware box in the fridge is perfect. Because I save so much seed I use Kilner jars and airtight herb and jam jars with sound lids, which I keep in their own fridges.

Ever since mid-summer I have also been saving tomato seeds. Eat the flesh and save the seeds. Lots of people will scoop out seed from the fruit and, after a quick rinse under a cold tap spread the seed onto kitchen paper to dry. The following year they sow the seed, paper and all. For personal use this

method is fine, but when saving seed for the HSL one needs to do things differently. Often I can have a large handful of pulpy seed-mass from one picking. I rinse this pulp in cold water and press the bulk through a fine sieve, before putting the fresh seed into a jam jar half-filled with water. I then leave the contents for a week to ferment slightly before rinsing and sieving. I then spread the seeds onto baking parchment and leave in the kitchen out of direct sunlight and away from the stove to dry over several days. It is then easy to scrape the seeds off the parchment and put them into a container with silica gel to complete drying.

Capsicums are a joy to save seed from. Again, they easily cross-pollinate so either grow just one variety or isolate. Harvest the fruit when absolutely ripe and string together on threads and allow to completely dry, at which point one can take extract the seeds.

And a final tip for successful seed-saving. Never dry seeds on a sunny window-sill. The heat can kill them. Best to dry more slowly in cool, dry and airy conditions.