Harvesting Seeds

By Nancy Abra
London Middlesex Master Gardeners

With the fall, comes harvest time. We are busy during this time of year gathering fruits, vegetables and herbs for drying, preserving, freezing and storing the products of our gardening efforts. But what about harvesting the seeds from those beautiful summer blooms.

There are a variety of reasons for harvesting seeds from your own flowers; some personal or it could be for environmental reasons. Perhaps you have a variety that you especially like and are concern that you will not be able to get it from your favourite seed company. Sometimes you may see a unique flower in your friend's garden or wildflowers while on a hike that you would like to grow in your own garden. Or maybe you have a heritage plant as I do. I collect the seeds from my Columbine (Aquilegia) to ensure I can grow these flowers in the future. The seed originally came from my mother's cottage garden, which were planted by my great grandmother over 100 years ago.

Maybe your reasons for harvesting seeds from your garden are economic or environmental, as you want to grow your own organic flowers or vegetables next year or maybe reproduce some native plants. Whatever the reason, harvesting seeds can be both fun and interesting. But there are a few things you should know.

Seeds from open-pollinated plants should be the ones harvested. These plants are those pollinated naturally or through human intervention by the same species of that plant. Seeds produced by hybridized or generic altered plants don't guarantee that those desirable traits will be carried on to the next generation or the seeds may be sterile and won't produce fruit.

For your seed harvest you don't need a lot of fancy equipment. You need small scissors to nip off the seed heads as some seedpods are sticky and will be easier than using your fingernails. You also will need small paper lunch bags and envelopes to put the seed heads in as soon as they are cut. Make sure you label these envelopes with the name, date gathered and from where you acquired the seed as soon as possible as it is amazing how quickly you will forget what variety or species is inside. For seed that is not totally dry or ripe place the pods or dead flower stems in a small cardboard box out of the elements and in a dry place. Once totally dry, put the seed into a labelled envelopes. Depending the size of the seed you may want a pair of tweezers or a small strainer to remove the bits of stems and dried pods.

Store your harvest in a container such as an old cookie tin or plastic airtight box. It is important to keep the seeds cool, dark and dry – maybe if you have room in the crisper in your fridge. Depending upon how many different seeds you collect, you could categorize your harvest alphabetically with dividers.

I find it very gratifying to share my harvest with friends and family - a jar of my sweet pickles, or herbal jelly or even some heritage seed. I can't think of a better token of 'Thinking of You' than a small little packet of seed tucked inside a greeting card for a special friend.