

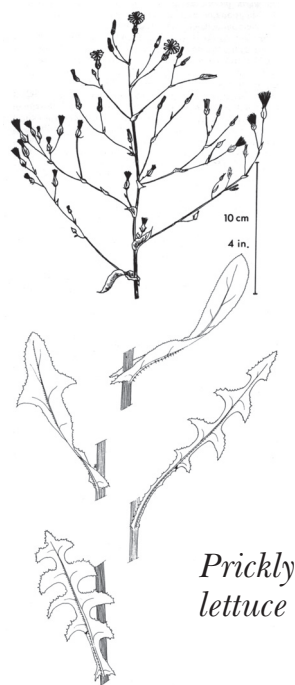
**W**hat makes a weed a weed? It just depends on whether you want it in the spot where it's growing. Even a corn plant is a weed if it's in a bean field. All of our cultivated plants come from wild plants, and some of those wild relatives are still around—sometimes as weeds. Though nearly all of our vegetables and flowers have come from other parts of the world, many of the wild cousins have found their way here too, and they can still interbreed with the cultivated varieties. For a seed saver, that's worth knowing.

**Lettuce** has been grown as a garden vegetable for well over six thousand years. It was originally cultivated by the early civilizations of the Mediterranean region, and was eaten by the Egyptians, the Romans and the Greeks. During its long history of cultivation, the simple wild lettuce was bred into dozens of shapes, an assortment of colours, and a wide range of textures and flavours. Seeds of Diversity's Heritage Plant Database lists over 1100 named varieties of lettuce, 270 of which are available for sale in Canada.

Lettuce was grown throughout Europe by the 1600s, and it was one of the first garden vegetables introduced to Canada by European settlers. Unwittingly, they also brought seeds of the original wild lettuce, probably in bags of grain, livestock feed or just in the untidy nooks of the ships' cargo holds.

Wild, or "prickly" lettuce, is a common weed throughout Canada. It looks something like a tall, erect dandelion, with that

cousin's jagged, toothed leaves but on a slender stalk that can reach about two feet in height. The flowers are identical to the cultivated lettuce, which look like small dandelion flowers themselves. You can eat wild lettuce, but you'll probably find the leaves bitter, tough and a bit spiny (it's called prickly lettuce for a reason). It's not so bad if you boil it mercilessly first. Hard to believe that the Egyptians and Romans bred this plant to become the modern lettuce, but that shows what six thousand years of plant selection can do.



Seed savers know that insects can cross-pollinate different varieties of lettuce over short distances, and that the recommended isolation distances of 12–25 feet (4–8 m) are well published. Although lettuce is normally self-pollinating, it's worth separating different varieties, or staggering

their flowering times, to prevent the small amount of cross-pollination that insects can nonetheless cause. However, we don't always think to remove the wild lettuce nearby. A quick glance at the margins of the garden should reveal this common weed, which is, as a wolf is to a poodle, an ancestor and a kissing cousin.

If wild lettuce pollinates a cultivated lettuce seed crop, it will normally only do so if it grows within 25 feet. Even then, only a few percent of the harvested seed will be crossed. The result in the following crop will be a few plants that look taller and darker than the regular lettuce, with tough toothy leaves and a bitter flavour. For continued seed production, the off-type plants can simply be discarded before they flower, leaving the rest of the plants to produce good seeds.

**Mustard** is not one plant, but dozens of species in a family that includes turnips, radishes, cabbage, horseradish and all the green, yellow, black and brown mustards that people eat. Some wild mustards cross with cultivated mustards, but many don't. That's a good thing, because nearly anywhere you go in this country you can't get away from some kind of wild mustard.

Mustard can have yellow or white flowers, and in general, the yellow species don't cross with the white. So if you're growing a yellow-flowered crop to save seed, and you have white-flowered wild mustard around the garden, you don't have to worry. It's more complicated if the colours are the same because there are different species

of yellow-flowered mustard, so they may or may not cross with wild yellow-flowered relatives. To be sure, find out the species name of your cultivated variety (e.g. *Brassica juncea*, *B. nigra*) and consult a wildflower book to learn the species of your local wild mustards. Different species don't cross-pollinate.

**Salsify** is a root vegetable that you might not know but you should try it. The seeds are about half an inch long, and easy to plant, but the seedlings are tricky to find. Look for a straight row of grass sprouts a few weeks after you sow the seeds, and don't be tempted to weed them because they're actually your salsify. After a long season, the white roots should be several inches long, with a subtle flavour. Chop fresh, fry in butter and serve.

Be sure to use fresh seeds, since they don't keep long. I often find that purchased salsify seeds have poor germination, and I think it's because they're not popular enough to move quickly through seed vendors' inventories. It's easy to grow your own seeds though. Salsify survives the winter in many parts of Canada, and the cultivated variety produces tall stalks of attractive purple flowers in its second year. Seeds are easy to harvest when the flower dries, like a giant fluffy dandelion head. And that should remind you of a weed you've seen—a giant dandelion

seed head, except that the wild salsify's flowers are yellow.

Bees pollinate the wild and cultivated salsify, but although they may once have been related, the two types don't cross with each other. No separation from wild salsify is needed to ensure pure seeds of the cultivated variety.

The **carrot**, not often considered the queen of the garden, is literally queen of the weeds. Most people know wild carrot by its more charming name of Queen Anne's Lace. Europeans used this wild plant as a flavouring in stews, and as a medicinal herb over a thousand years ago. You can eat the roots of Queen Anne's Lace, and you'll notice a strong carrot smell and flavour, but you'll also find them thin, tough and bitter. Hundreds of years of selection by ancient gardeners produced the tender mild roots that French chefs served in the 1600s and that we know today.

Carrots were one of the very first European vegetables introduced to Canada, in particular by the French. They quickly became commonplace in New France (Quebec and the Maritimes), and so did their wild cousin. If you've ever walked through a meadow in August, you've probably noticed that the wild carrot likes to stick to your clothes. The dried flower produces hundreds of seeds with prickly hairs that cling to any person or animal walking past. That's

how the seeds get around. Cultivated carrot seeds have prickly hairs too, but they're usually rubbed off mechanically, to prevent the seeds from sticking together in clumps. Early settlers carried cultivated carrot seeds in bags, but they carried wild carrot seeds unnoticed on their clothes, blankets and animals. Now the wild carrot grows nearly everywhere in Canada.

This makes carrot seed production fairly difficult. Bees and flies pollinate the flowers in midsummer, and they carry pollen from the wild plants to any cultivated carrots that may be blooming within 1000 feet (300 m) or so. Most gardens in Canada have Queen Anne's Lace blooming within that distance. A commercial technique is to mow a wide margin around carrot seed crops. Some small-scale seed growers construct cages with fine-meshed netting to keep their carrot flowers safe from free-flying insects. Both methods are daunting to most home gardeners, though. An easier method is to simply allow cross-pollination to take place and "rogue out" the crosses later. Any seeds that are crosses between cultivated and wild carrots will produce a root that is whitish, thin and tough like the wild parent. Carrots only bloom in their second year, so you have a year and a half after sowing the seeds to notice the crosses and remove them from your next seed garden. That's a perfectly good method for a non-professional grower.

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**M**ore information about seed saving can be found in Seeds of Diversity's handbook *How to Save Your Own Seeds* (fifth edition). Published in 2005, this expanded edition is 48 pages with over 80 photographs that illustrate seed saving techniques in the home garden. Available from Seeds of Diversity for \$12 (postage-paid). See the online order form at [www.seeds.ca](http://www.seeds.ca).