

In late October, I participated in “Heritage Breeds & Heirloom Seeds: The Past Strengthening our Future,” a gathering of gardeners and farmers in Debert, Nova Scotia. The speakers included Dan Jason of Salt Spring Seeds, Greta Kryger of Greta’s Organic Gardens, Andrea Berry of Hope Seeds and Greg Wingate of Mapple Farm.

I gleaned the following tips from our wide-ranging discussions.

Seed saving tips

- Bean seeds need ‘to breathe.’ As with all seeds, keep the beans in a moisture-proof container like a glass bottle or steel canister. Once a month or so, open the container for a moment to allow for a quick air exchange.
- To save small seeds, such as many herb seeds, pick the seedheads (flowerheads) once they are mature and dry, and place in a pillow case. Shake the pillow case every few days over the course of a few weeks. After that, most of the seeds will have fallen from the heads. Use a series of sieves to separate seeds from the chaff.
- To save echinacea seeds, pick the flowerheads when they are almost completely dry and put them in the freezer for a few days. Once you remove them from the freezer, the seeds will drop out of the heads.
- When saving seeds of peas, select the seeds of high-yielding plants. With peas, the quality of the seed stock declines quickly over time.
- According to a few seed savers and contrary to what most seed-saving books recommend, popcorn and sweet corn can be grown in the same field without cross-pollinating, even when they flower at the same time. (Note: other growers remain suspicious of this.)
- To remove dry corn kernels from the cobs, seed savers can use an inexpensive corn sheller available from Southern Exposure Seed Exchange.

Damping-off

A gardener, who was just starting to use organic methods, asked how others dealt with damping-off (a fungal disease that can kill emerging and young seedlings). The group offered a number of suggestions, including:

- Water seedling flats with weak chamomile tea or compost tea every second watering.

- Fill flats right to the rim with potting mix so that there isn’t a pocket of stale air above the seeds.
- Use compost rather than a sterile potting mix. The compost contains microorganisms that can inhibit the fungi responsible for damping off.

Phacelia

A few growers talked about phacelia. The plant is an excellent green manure and bee crop. The plant (seeds are available from Salt Spring Seeds) attracts many pollinators including honeybees and wild insects. When used as a green manure, it produces excellent soil tilth and appears to control weeds allelopathically (i.e. by releasing chemicals that inhibit their germination).

Cucumber beetles

Several growers provided tips to control cucumber beetles. The key is to catch them early in the morning when the beetles are slow moving. Greg Wingate of Mapple Farm uses a hand-held vacuum to remove the beetles. David Cozac and Debbie Russell of Big Sky Farm pick them by hand. Debbie has attached a mirror to a hoe and walks down the rows with the mirror facing up. This way, she can see the beetles without touching the leaves (which would trigger them to leap).

Corn pests

Many of the gardeners who grew corn applied oil (vegetable, sunflower or other types) to corn silk to control earworms. Another common corn pest, the raccoon, it was agreed, is much more difficult to control.

