

## **“Faith in a Seed” – H.D. Thoreau**

We are all hunter-gatherers when it comes to seeds. Perhaps gathering seeds was the beginning of civilization? When seeds put down roots, did our nomadic ancestors, too, put down roots?

Gardeners are prone to having their pockets lined with gathered seeds, to have a collection of envelopes and pill bottles containing seeds, the identity of which may have once been on the missing labels. I have a pot bulging with seedlings, still with their fat first seed leaves. I do know I shook them out of a small blue bottle that had been in the garage a few years. I remember the friend’s garden but not the plant. I will water them with cool chamomile tea, a suggestion from Denise Greene, garden designer and owner of Sassafras Farm Nursery that specializes in natives for our area. It would be a shame for them to damp off before they are large enough to identify.

Annuals may be easier to start from seed than perennials, having only one season to flourish, they produce seeds in prodigious numbers. Sometimes you find a seedling underneath the leaves of the still blooming annual. I had one six-inch tall hybrid marigold several years ago and each year since I have had ungainly three-foot marigolds wave their bright orange heads in neighboring spots. Neat!

Perennials may be started from seeds in the same way as annuals. Our native columbine is a self-sowing perennial and a good thing that is as the plant is short-lived. Once the seed capsule is brown you can pull the tired plant out of the bed and shake it and expect to see columbine in early spring.

In her program at the York County Library two weeks ago, Denise Greene demonstrated methods of propagating native plants to member of the John Clayton Native Plant Society. Unlike the many texts on such processes, Denise made it look both doable and great fun. Delightfully messy of course, but anyone given to ironing underwear will be planting hedges and lawns, not beguiling butterflies with exuberant native plants.

A brown paper bag is the tool for gathering ripe seeds: cut off the head, drop it into the bag where it will continue to dry and then shake vigorously to loosen the seeds. The seeds of some fall blooming flowers such as ironweed, asters, and liatris are best gathered after the first frost. When keeping them for spring sowing, they may be separated from the chaff and sealed in plastic bags and labeled. Seeds can be stored in the refrigerator since some need a cold ‘winter’ before they will break dormancy.

Seeds from aster, baptisia, campanula, coreopsis, gaillardia, gaura, heliopsis, helianthus, salvia, sedum, and tiarella may be sown outside in spring where they are to grow. If you are sowing large numbers a seed starting bed is more protective: if you want to start them inside use a sterile seed-starting mix and not garden soil.

Other perennial seeds require 'stratification' and need to be stored in the fridge for 90 days in damp sphagnum moss or potting soil. This system should be used if you are not certain dry storage is adequate. A few perennials go into double dormancy and need 90 days moist 70 degree storage, then 90 days cold moist storage followed by another warm moist 90 days. For this you need to mark a calendar. This process is needed for liliun, bloodroot, mertensia, erythronium, caltha, asarum, dicentra, claytonia and cimicifuga.

We tend to think all seeds need to be tucked into the seedbed and covered up with a generous dusting of soil or straw or such, but some require light to germinate. The list: aruncus, asclepius, campanula, chelone, galax, gentiana, heuchera, lobelia, penstemon, rhexia, sedum, veronicastrum.

For those of us in a hurry, the "so many plants, so little time" set, division is the favorite way to have more plants. Plants that bloom in spring, may be divided in fall and those fall bloomers may be divided in spring. Any plant with a mass of roots and several crowns may be divided this way, even when they are dormant. In dividing those plants with rhizomes or fleshy roots, be sure there are eyes, incipient buds, in each piece you replant. When the plant is dormant and has a mass of fibrous roots, you can take a chance and separate a block of the roots to replant.

You may find propagation becomes so satisfactory an enterprise, your friends will line up at the garden gate for handouts.