

# Vegetable seeds and tubers

*Bill Sowerbutts*

It was suggested I write about collecting vegetable seeds in order to encourage more people to donate vegetable seeds to the seed exchange scheme. My initial reaction was this would be a non-starter as the last thing vegetable growers want is their plants going to seed, especially stalwarts like root vegetables, brassicas, and lettuce. Any of those that do get on the reproduction route early are often swiftly removed here, before they grow rapidly upwards and outwards crowding out their more well-behaved neighbours. Also the plant itself becomes tough, inedible, and unusable.

But some vegetable plants, including the above, are very attractive and statuesque when they go to seed, and in a cottage garden where vegetables are grown alongside other plants or in with them there is less pressure to root them out. Therefore there will be greater potential for seed to be nurtured and collected.

I already collect vegetable seeds for my own use, notably peas and beans. This is not planned, but there are always some pods that escape getting picked for eating. In a good year surplus pods, if left, go beyond the edible stage and become fully developed, then dry out becoming prime candidates for collection and use the following year. However any vegetable seeds from F1 hybrids won't come true so are best avoided.

In the past I have had a good range of interesting pea and bean seeds via the seed exchange scheme - these must result from planning by growers determined to leave some plants for seed rather than rely on chance. You only need to enter keywords like 'saving vegetable seeds' into Google to discover a whole world of useful information. I always check out [www.realseeds.co.uk/seedsavinginfo.html](http://www.realseeds.co.uk/seedsavinginfo.html). Many of their pages for vegetable seeds end with instructions for saving their seeds. I also save herb seeds such as sorrel and sage, and also potato tubers.

In both 2012 and 2013 it was wet when my potatoes were reaching maturity and their tops got struck by blight. Although harvesting conditions were far from perfect I quickly dug up all the tubers, or so I thought, before they too became infected. In 2013 I had rows of beetroot and

spinach growing away well in the soil where the potatoes had been previously. A few potato stems suddenly appeared from tubers left behind. I dug them up thinking the problem was solved. However, in the following days and weeks so many potatoes appeared it would have been impossible to dig them all up, so I just let them grow. Consequently, my potato crop was bigger than expected.

The main culprit was the Shetland Black potato. With me this produces a lot of small tubers which are difficult to see because they are the same colour as my soil when wet. I've had a similar experience this year but, by chance, the bit of ground I left for late sowings is where I grew potatoes in 2013. So, as they appeared the rogue plants were carefully dug up with as much enclosing soil as possible and moved into trenches. The move seems to have spurred them on and they now look as good as my conventionally planted potatoes. If I was asked to nominate a new invasive species it would probably be the Shetland Black - I don't see how I will ever get rid of it! As to its culinary qualities, when boiled it turns an unappetising grey colour, not unlike that of an old dishcloth. But it roasts very well, the skin producing a crisp, crunchy shell.

It is said that potatoes are good for clearing new ground where the soil is out of condition. They seem to have been imbued with some magical property that involves working away underground as they grow to make the soil friable and fertile. But I maintain it is the grower who should get the credit, not the potato. First you have to get the ground in a reasonable state and dig a trench where you place the tubers. This usually involves digging and earth moving. As the plants grow they have to be earthed up. This involves a second phase of earth moving. Finally, harvesting involves excavating, which means the grower not the potato effectively turns the soil over again. No wonder the resulting soil is in good condition!

Us cottage gardeners generally follow the ebb and flow of the gardening year. Collecting vegetable seed fits into this thrifty and natural system making full use of the plants and doing what comes naturally.

Why don't you have a go?

*Bill gardens in Cheshire.*

