

SEED COLLECTING ETHICS

Once seeds start to “grow on you” you may, like I have over the years, become obsessed with all that potential in small packages and somewhat compulsive (hopefully in a good way) about collecting your own. I find it’s a really pleasant hunt to go on, and it’s very interesting to realize that in the course of the hunt you develop a search image.

For example, in the late winter I love seeing the delicate white flowers of the milkmaids (*Dentaria californica*) scattered throughout my oak woodlands, and I make mental notes about where there were large drifts growing close together. But once the long, narrow, greenish seed pods (technically a silique in the mustard family) develop, the plants seem to disappear. That is, until I really see the first one, and then all the others suddenly become obvious!

By the way, animals and insects eat seeds, too; they are nutritious and often the deer, or small rodents have gotten them first. Timing is important and so is a certain amount of restraint.

For about half the year, almost every flat surface in the shadier parts of my home are covered with open boxes of seeds that are drying. Collecting and drying the seeds kind of happens over the course of the year. Cleaning the seeds usually happens as a group activity on inclement days; Home Ground volunteers and I all sit around a large table and our fingers do the work while we eat, drink, talk and generally enjoy each other’s company.

And, to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves during the collecting season, I keep small manila envelopes in the car and in all my pockets. Always collect into paper, never into a plastic bag.

PRINCIPLES OF SUCCESSFUL SEED COLLECTING

Always get permission first if collecting seeds anywhere but on your own property, and even then, collect sparingly.

- If you see more than ten fruits on a plant, take only one in ten.
- If you see nine, take none—wait until the next season!

Collect fruits only when fully ripe, and collect over time and space

- Collect only from healthy specimens
- Collect from different plant specimens of the same species
- Collect over a period of time. Fruits do not ripen all at once!

Collect only during dry weather or later in the day after morning dew has evaporated. Moistened seeds are vulnerable to mold.

Avoid adding a lot of unnecessary plant parts to your seed collecting. Detritus provides sites for potential pathogens.

Label your seed when you are collecting it. Do NOT rely on your memory, even if you put a distinctive plant part with the seeds! Besides the botanical name, it is useful to note when and where the seed was collected and any noteworthy details about the parent plant.

VALUABLE INFORMATION TO KEEP ABOUT YOUR STORED SEED

Botanical name. Genus is always capitalized, species is always lower case. There may also be a sub-species, varietal, or cultivar name

Common name. Often confusing, sometimes quaint and interesting

Date and Place where the seed was collected

Name of the person who collected the seed

Specifics about the plant. Color of the flower, season of flowering. For CA natives include the plant community it is found in

Specifics about the growth. Type: annual, biennial, or perennial, shrub or tree; evergreen or herbaceous; height and spread of mature plant

Cultural requirements. Sun, part sun, or shade; water usage; specific soil requirements

Pre-germination technique needed, if necessary

Habitat information. Larval host plant; nectaring plant for hummers or insects; deer resistant or deer proof?