

How to Collect and Store Your Own Zinnia Seeds

By Candy Roach, Bexar County Master Gardener

Now that summer is fading, so are the blooms on our zinnias. It's almost time to clear out the summer flowers and refresh your beds with cool weather plants that should be arriving in nurseries soon. If you're interested in harvesting your own zinnia seeds to plant next year, here are 5 tips to get you started.



Tip #1 - Start with flowers that have dried naturally. The petals should be crisp and brown to the touch. Grasp the dried petals and gently pull them from the flower head, exposing the seed.

Tip #2 - Examine the seeds which are arrow-shaped and should be a solid dark grey to black in color. Healthy seeds will feel firm and plump and have a nice consistent color. Each petal has the potential to produce a viable seed, which means it should sprout into a seedling provided it has ample water, sunlight and the correct temperature for optimum germination. On average, the zinnia flower will produce about 10% viable seeds. In many cases you will not get any viable seeds.



Tip #3 - Take time to look at your seeds. In the first photo on the left, these seeds are ones that I would save because of their shape, size, color and firmness. The seeds in the second photo to the right might germinate but they are more likely to produce weak plants. You can see that the seeds are more spear-shaped than arrow-shaped. I prefer to save the best seeds for storage.

Weak seeds may prove to be viable, but most likely, they will be inferior plants. It's important to understand that the tiny seedling only has so much energy stored in the seedpod that will enable it to germinate and produce roots and starter leaves to get the plant on its way to becoming a beautiful zinnia. If the seed is weak from the beginning, the chance of its being able to make it through that process is diminished. You don't have to save a lot of seeds, but if you're like me and have an addiction to collecting seeds, you can always share them.



There are many gardeners who prefer to cut their dried flower heads off and leave them in the garden, while others strip the flower heads and save them in paper sacks in the garage. Then there are people like me, who like to collect and sort them, strip off the petals and package them with planting instructions, while carefully storing them indoors in a closet with silica gel to keep them nice and dry until next year. All of these methods are effective. Just pick one that suits your style and go with it. Store your seeds in a cool, dry location so they won't get moldy. While there's nothing wrong with just buying zinnia plants when they are available, it is very satisfying to grow your own from seed. It's always amazing to see what Mother Nature will present you with next summer.



Tip #4 - Hybrid versus Heirloom Plants / Seeds - What does this mean? Here is a definition from Garden Guides: "A hybrid flower is basically the offspring of two distinct species, bred by human manipulation. Simply put, flower growers choose among the best growths and manually pollinate the flower to achieve specific results. This can result in flowers bred for certain colors or other desired characteristics." See <https://www.gardenguides.com/>

Let me simplify that for you as it relates to seed collecting. If you collect seeds from a hybrid plant, the seeds will not bloom true to the hybrid plant from which they were collected. Instead, these seeds will revert back to the original

parents of the plants. On the other hand, an Heirloom plant or seed will bloom true to the parent plant. Seeds from a hybrid plant will surprise, delight, amaze and sometimes disappoint you, so gather these seeds and see what Mother nature returns to you.

Tip #5 - Once you plant your seedlings, don't be afraid to thin your plants. It's exciting to see dozens of little seedlings sprouting, and it's also normal for you to want to nurture every seedling that sprouts. Be ruthless in thinning out your seedlings!! I can't emphasize this point enough; otherwise, you will have an overgrown patch that lacks air circulation and will be prone to disease due to overcrowding.

Each plant will take up about 12"-15" in width when it matures. I try to leave about 5 seedlings per square foot and wait to see which ones grow the best.



Sometimes I will wait until the first bloom to see what color the plant will be. You can get some beautiful and unique colors from cross-pollination.

Butterflies don't care how the plant looks as long as it is filled with nectar. It has been my personal experience that zinnias that I have grown from seed are superior in attracting butterflies when compared to some of the plants that I have bought at nurseries. Butterflies of all varieties, as well as other pollinators, flock to the zinnias and delight in the abundant nectar buffet presented to them.

So, give seed collection a try. Who knows? You may find it addicting!

All photos by author