

Autumn Seed Saving & Sowing to Support Native Pollinators

Seed saving is a valuable ancient practice that supports the health of local ecosystems. Marblehead and Salem's original indigenous inhabitants, the [Naumkeag](#), taught the English colonists to save and sow the best seed. Their local knowledge helped colonists survive and thrive in their new home. Below you will find some easy ways you can save and sow the seeds of important native plants. These plants play a vital role in supporting local wildlife and our food systems by providing important forage and nesting sites for native bees and butterflies.



Kids collecting Black-eyed Susan Seeds in their backyard.

Native bees vs. Honeybees

Bees are responsible for pollinating 80% of flowering plants, and wild bees are [twice as effective](#) as honeybees in producing seeds and pollinating food crops! In Massachusetts, there are three critically endangered bumblebees: *B. vagans*, *B. fervidus*, and *B. terricola*. Like most native bees, these bumblebees need pollen and nectar sources in early spring through late fall to successfully reproduce and complete their lifecycle. For more information on plant-pollinator interactions, visit the [Gegear Lab Website at UMASS Dartmouth](#).



Native Plant Seeds to Save and Sow



Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*): Native to eastern North America, this beautiful flower supports birds, beetles, flies, moths, butterflies, hummingbirds, bumblebees, small carpenter bees, sweat bees, and long-horned bees.



In late fall, cut off the flower heads and let dry for a week. Leave the cut stems about 15 inches tall to help small carpenter bees find a spring nesting site. New growth in spring will hide these old but ecologically important stems.



To remove the seeds from the flower, put the seed heads in a coffee can or jar with a lid, and shake vigorously. Store them in a cool, dry place, or follow the autumn sowing instructions listed below.



Wild Bergamot or beebalm (*Monarda fistulosa*): supports many butterflies, hummingbirds, and a wide variety of native bees and wasps.



Roughly 4-6 weeks after blooming, the seed heads will be mature enough for collecting.



After the seed heads are dry, put them in a paper bag, and shake the seeds off. Store the seeds in a cool, dry place, or follow the autumn sowing instructions listed below.



Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*): a food supply powerhouse, Milkweed supports over 450 different insects including butterflies, moths, flies, beetles, ants, bees, and wasps. It's known to support the entire lifecycle of the threatened monarch butterfly.



The seeds need to be fully formed and dark brown for saving. If you open a pod and they are still white or light brown, wait a few weeks before harvesting. You can put a rubber band or mesh bag over the pods so you don't lose the seed to the wind.



Let the seeds dry in a mesh bag, then pull the seeds out of the pod and place them in a paper bag with a few coins. Shake vigorously, and cut a small hole in the corner of the paper bag to remove the seeds without the fluff. Follow the directions below.

Sowing Native Perennial Seeds in Autumn

1. Once your seeds have dried, plant them in 4-inch pots about 1/8-1/4 inches apart in well moistened compost-based potting soil.
2. Label plants and gently cover them with a sprinkling of damp sand.
3. Place the pots in a shady area outside and cover them with some rodent wire or hardware cloth, securing the wire around the pots with bricks or rocks.
4. Many native perennial seeds need to experience cold temperatures (stratification) to germinate successfully in spring, so let nature do its thing and check on the seedlings in late March.
5. In April, water the seedlings every few days and transplant seedlings into larger pots if necessary.
6. Transplant the seedlings in your garden in June or July, and keep them watered. Some species will not bloom the first year, but be patient, the bees and butterflies with thank you! For more information on sowing perennial seeds in autumn, check out the: **Wild Seed**



Kids collecting bee balm seeds.