



EDUCATIONAL SERIES ON SEED SAVING

When is a Tomato Seed Ripe?



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Let the seeds ripen

Ideally a tomato for seed-saving should be a bit overripe, but who wants to waste a perfectly good eating tomato? No need, a tomato that's eating-ripe is also fine for seed. But what about a tomato that's not even ripe enough to eat? Let's say you had to pick it green due to a heavy frost forecast. That's probably still okay, since tomatoes (and also peppers) have the ability to continue ripening after separation from the plant. Moreover, as they're still within the placenta (yeah, I know, who thinks of salsa stock in such terms?), the seeds (and the embryos within them) continue to draw nutrients from the fruit.



*Ripe heirloom Appalachian tomatoes
Photo by Mehmet Öztan*

I've collected lots of perfectly viable seed from after-ripened fruit. The important thing is that the green fruit must be glossy green, not pale matte-skinned fruit that'll never mature. Whatever color, place the fruit on a warm sunny shelf until it really is red-ripe (assuming of course that red is the ripe color, as opposed to the many other colors tomatoes can be), then process the seed.



Tomato seeds and flesh fermenting in a bucket

Harvest the seeds

Just in case you're not up on the proper way to process tomato seed, here it is in a nutshell: cut the ripe fruit through the equator and squeeze out the "guts" from both halves into a bowl, bucket, or whatever. That amniotic gel that surrounds the seed (think frog's eggs) has got to go, as it impedes thorough drying and harbors disease spores, including the germs for "damping off". It's really quite simple: let that (open) container sit on a warm shelf a few days until it is "all ready". How do you know when it's "all ready"? Your significant other will tell you in no uncertain terms, as will the fruit flies hovering around. A bit of mold on the surface? No problem, unless you leave it so long that the seeds start to sprout – not likely. Now put it in a larger container – I use fruit jars – with several times as much water and slosh it around.

It helps to break any lumps with your fingers if it doesn't gross you out. As the mixture swirls around in the jar, part of it – the good seed – sinks to the bottom while the other part – fermented pulp and other crud – rises to the top where you can carefully pour it off. The separation isn't perfect, so only pour off what comes easily, stopping long before you lose any seed. By the way, some seed may adhere to the crud and spill out, though I usually find that is hollow gas-filled seed – worthless and good riddance. Add more water to do it again, several times, until the water is clear and only clean seeds lie on the bottom. I drain off the water through a sieve, press the seed drier with the bottom of a spoon, then spread it on a double paper towel in a sunny (but draft-free) place until perfectly dry – usually a few days. Then crumple up the seed lumps and put them in a packet or any other container of your choice to be stored.