**Survival Seeds - Advice from an Avid Gardener, by Mrs. W.**

By [James Wesley, Rawles](http://www.survivalblog.com) on November 12, 2010 8:52 PM

I have watched with some concern as the survival seed business has exploded these past few years. Advertisements abound for survival garden seed buckets that cost upwards of $100 and promise a years supply of food for a family. Since most Americans have never grown more than a few tomato plants they are unaware that many of these claims are overblown. Anyone who has tried to produce most of their own food will tell you that things never go perfectly. There is always some blight, freak weather, or insect invasion that knocks out at least one of your main crops. And in a survival situation that could be deadly.

Choosing your survival seeds is just as important as researching what guns to buy or stocking your year’s supply of food. It requires even more thought because there are so many variables that effect your choices. That’s why I caution people to really take some time and consider what they need before buying a survival seed package. This could be the difference between survival and starvation for your family so don’t just go out and buy the easy thing. I have been doing large-scale gardening and food preservation for over 13 years now so I have had lots of experience with different mail order catalogs as well as store bought seeds. I have tried both hybrid and heirlooms and now own a small business selling heirloom and standard seeds.

**First lets look at some of the problems with survival seed setups:**

**Not designed for your particular climate:** While studying various survival seed packages I noticed that at least 25% of all the seed were not varieties that would do well in our area. So that means 25% less food than advertised. This is not inherently the companies’ fault. America is a big place so designing a package that would cater to everyone’s needs is impossible. Still that will be cold comfort if you are living off what you can produce on your land.

**Not designed for personal tastes:** Many of the vegetables were not things my family will eat, although when starving who knows. And some I have never tried to grow. Experimentation is not good in a life or death situation so I am wary of trying something new when my life depends on it.

**Not designed for crops that store well:** Remember that if you are actually using these seeds you are probably living in a very different world. The main seeds that will be useful are seeds producing foods for long winter storage such as beans, corn, root vegetables, and winter squash. These are easy to plant, grow, harvest, and preserve for future use. All of which are very important considerations. You do not want seeds that require specialized tools to plant or harvest and that take lots of equipment to preserve for eating later.

So yes, you may be getting lots of seeds in your survival seed bucket but will it really be enough to feed your family? Wouldn’t it be better (and probably cheaper) to choose seeds you know you will use and also will provide large harvests of long storable food? Here are considerations to ponder when choosing seeds for survival.

**What you should look for**

**The number one consideration in choosing seeds is this.** You must realize that the world will be a very different place if you have to use your seeds. You will be facing hunger and perhaps starvation for the first time. You will be doing most of the work by hand and may have to cut up and remove the sod from your yard. This is all **very** hard work and takes weeks to do. Every square inch of your property should be turned to some kind of food production. The more you tailor your seeds to ease of planting, care, and harvest the better off your will be. Remember that your goal is surviving, not producing the biggest tomato. The magic words to look for on any variety are- **Drought resistant, prolific harvests, heavy bearer, disease resistant, early maturity, excellent winter storage, good keeper.**

**Quality of the seeds:** Absolutely essential! If your seeds come from a shoddy operation they will have a poor germination rate and that will translate into less food. I have bought seeds from Gurneys that germinated after 7 years and produced strong plants and abundant food. While a notable heirloom Seed Company shipped me seeds in clear plastic packages (major no!) and I had very poor germination rates. Try to avoid seeds from stores as these have been sitting in the bright lights and fluctuating temperatures that cut down on germinations rates.

**Ease of planting, harvest, and processing:** If you have no experience gardening you want plants that require little effort to thrive. You also want something that is easy to harvest and process for storing and also something that produces a large harvest and tons of calories.

**The Five Main Crops to Stock Up On**

**Beans and Peas:** Both string and shelling kind are easy to plant, grow like the dickens, produce a lot of food and can be left on the plant to dry for shelling. They produce high protein, high calorie food. Baked beans anyone?

**Corn:** Easy to plant, harvest, and process for cornmeal which will be your main grain. You can dry the cobs on the plant or hang them in the house and even a child of five can help with planting and harvest. It is a high quality food staple that has a multitude of uses. Look for varieties used for cornmeal. Another bonus is the fact that every part of the plant is edible to cows, horses, pigs, and goats. Research the safe way to feed this crop to your animals.

**Root Vegetables:** Potatoes, sweet potatoes, carrots, onions, garlic, turnips, beets, etc. These are all high quality foods that are easy to plant care for and store over winter. You can keep them in a basement or even a garbage can for most of the winter. Look for varieties known for long storage.

**Winter Squash:** Excellent for long storage, high in nutrition and vitamins and a very easy care plant. There are literally hundreds of varieties out there so look for those renowned for storage and taste. Always check to see if they will do well in your area, especially in the north.

**Tomatoes:** Produces tons of fruits and is easy to grow. There are hundreds of varieties so check for those that are noted producers of large harvests and are drought tolerant and that will do well in your area. If you have not stockpiled jars and lids you can still dry them for winter use.

Note that the beans, corn, and squash form the “Three Sisters” of the Native American food crops. They create an almost perfect food when combined. All of the above plants produce high yields of food that is very easy to store and harvest. Remember that you will be relying on the food you grown from fall until spring so the longer it will store the better. Lettuce is great and has its place but it stores for about 3 days un-refrigerated and won't grow in freezing winter conditions.  What are you going to do for food when the garden freezes?

**Heirloom vs. Hybrid**

I am about to make some peoples' heads explode but I have to say that heirlooms are not all they are cracked up to be. Yes they are open pollinated, yes in some cases they produce better tasting food, but does that mean they are a better choice in a survival situation? I hear advertisement after advertisement crowing about open pollinated seeds like they are some kind of super seed. Most people who know anything about seed propagation can tell you this is way overblown. Here’s the truth about heirloom seeds vs. hybrid.

**1. Almost all heirlooms are actually “hybrids”:** Ahhrrggghhh! Someone’s head just exploded! Okay take a deep breath and read on. Crossing two varieties of a plant to get a certain type of fruit or veggie created almost all of our “heirlooms”. This is done all the time in nature by cross pollination or intentionally by farmers. Lets look at how most fruit or vegetables are created. First the plant puts out a flower with it genetic material in the pollen. Mr. Bee comes along and sips some nectar from your slicing cucumber and gets the pollen on his legs. Then he goes to the next cucumber plant, which is a pickling variety and sips some nectar there. When he does that he fertilized that flower with the genetic material from the slicing cucumber plant. A cucumber is formed from that union and if you let it go past ripeness and harvest the seeds from that cucumber what will you get? A “hybrid” between the two varieties! The seeds formed in that cucumber has both the genetic material from a slicing and the pickling varieties.

That’s right a “hybrid” is just a cross between two different varieties. This happens naturally in the wild all the time. Farmers have been doing this for thousands of years to increase yields, produce a certain trait in a fruit, or promote resistance to disease. Lets say a farmer loves the flavor from one tomato but wants it to be bigger. So the farmer cross pollinates it from a large tomato variety and then harvests the resulting seeds. Next year he plants those seeds and chooses the plants that produce both larger fruit and fruit that tastes better for future seed saving. To get a pure seed that will grow true to the parent plant you would have to put little bags over the flowers to prevent fertilization from outside sources and then hand fertilize the flower with a paint brush. Or only grow one variety of that plant on your land and hope that Mr. Bee has not been visiting any other gardens.

Many seeds you see in the store or in the non-heirloom catalogs are actually heirlooms: That’s right you will find some of the same varieties in the heirloom catalogs. Varieties like Connecticut field pumpkins, Little Marvel sweet peas, Black Beauty eggplant. The list is quite long. Why are these heirlooms in standard seed catalogs? Well they are just varieties that have proven over the test of time to be excellent and so it are still popular.

**3. Hybrids require more water and fertilizer**: When you selectively breed for higher yields and bigger or sweeter fruit it naturally causes the plant to use more nutrients and water. After all the more fruit a plant produces increases its need for water and nutrients. This is true in any plant, hybrid or heirloom. An heirloom that is a known producer for high yields will need more nutrients than one that does not. It is just that hybrids generally produce **even more** than the best producing heirloom thus needing more nutrients and water. In a survival situation you may need that extra food to survive so think seriously of using hybrids for the first few years.

**4. Hybrids are weaker:** When you push for one trait in a plant or animal you often loose from another. So while you many get huge yields, that demand takes away from aspects of the plant. Many varieties of veggies are bred for disease resistance. Do not confuse this with *Genetically Modified Plants*. Those are plants that actually have pesticides in their genetic makeup through mad scientist tinkering. And these freaks of nature should be banned!

Hybrids that are disease resistant are just those that have been chosen from plants that showed a superior resistance to certain blight. (This would be like me going out to my corn and finding all my plants infected with blight except one. I would be wise to harvest the seeds from that one plant and use them to plant next years corn patch) this is a very useful trait in a survival situation because while other people may loose an entire crop from some fungus (we had this happen) your plants will still be thriving. The food from these plants may not taste as good as the heirlooms you could have grown but at least you have food.

**5. Hybrids will not breed true:** This is absolutely right! Hybrids will spit out a variety that is different from the one you got the seed out of. But then again unless you are careful and knowledgeable about your seed propagation, many of the seeds that you will be saving from your heirloom seeds will be natural hybrids from cross-pollination.

**6. Heirlooms taste better:** Absolutely. I love my heirloom tomatoes, melons, and winter squash. I know I’ve been a little hard on the heirlooms thus far, but it’s mainly because of all the smug comments that are bandied about willy-nilly regarding the superiority of heirlooms. I believe both have their place in our survival seeds preps.

**7. Heirlooms breed true:** This is **only** if you know a lot about seed production and know how to keep your plant from being cross pollinated with a different variety. Most people do not have this knowledge. However there are many types of plants that are “self pollinators” meaning they create seeds without outside pollination. These would be good selections for the survival seeds. These include peas, beans, lettuces, and tomatoes. So don’t loose hope!

**The Two Pronged Survival Seed Plan**

So are heirlooms better than hybrids? I guess it all depends on what you’re using them for. I suggest a two pronged approach for survival seed storage that I think will increase the odds for most newbies to succeed at producing better harvests and thus better chances of surviving the first critical years after a total collapse.

**Why hybrids for the first two years?**

Hybrids have noted traits that will be valuable in a survival situation. So you may not be able to get true seeds from the parent plants but as seeds are relatively cheap - 35 cents to $1.99 per packet - stocking two years worth is not that big of an investment. Here is a list of qualities that make hybrids a good choice.

**Early Harvest** - this means you will get your peas, lettuce, melons, or corn sooner than anyone else. Also consider that you may have people stealing your crops so getting them to harvest faster may help you because thieves will be expecting the harvesting to not start for weeks.

**Disease Resistant** - many varieties are noted for disease resistance. This is very important because you could loose your entire tomato crop to one blight. One year our area was affected by tomato blight and only those people with resistant varieties had tomatoes.

**Drought Tolerant** - You may not have running water anymore
and be relying on rain or on hauled water so the less you need the better

**High Yields** - This is a sword that cuts both ways. The more the plant produces the better for your family, but it will also mean more water and nutrients demanded. If you live in a drought prone area or an area that you must always irrigate I would go more to the drought tolerant plants. But if you have adequate water go for the high yields. Also take into consideration loss due to theft and animal and insect damage.

All of these are **very** important if you are **really** relying on your garden to survive.

**For the First Two Years After a Total Collapse**

Buy enough seeds for two years worth of planting in Hybrids or **Notably High Producing Heirlooms**.  You will be new to this and as a newbie many of your ventures will not pan out the way the book says. Gardening takes practice! Also you may be using soil that is of poor quality, is from just broken sod, or has little nutrients. The more you stack the deck in your favor the more likely you are to get a decent harvest. Get seeds for plants that mature early, have high crop yields, and are disease resistant and drought tolerant. Remember that you may experience crop loss or destruction from those searching for food. The more you can produce with quicker harvest times the better.

Make sure your seeds are suited towards your climate. Call your local extension office and they can give you a list of varieties that are known to do well in your area.

Buy seeds in paper packets not plastic bags. The more light the seed is exposed to the more likely it is to not germinate or be weak.

Get seeds that produce food that is good for storage and easy to grow. Concentrate on the Three Sisters (Beans, Corn, Squash) and round out with **lots** of root vegetables. Then add extras that will make the diet more varied. Look especially for varieties that can be grown into late fall like cabbage, leeks, spinach, Swiss chard, lettuces, beets, carrots, turnips etc. There are some fall crops that can be grown under cover deep into winter. Try to get more than one variety of the same group so that if one gets knocked out from disease the other might escape. Sow several different winter squash varieties. That way you aren’t in a fix if one variety ends up tanking in your area.

**As always make sure the varieties are suited to your climate! Many long season crops will not mature in time for early fall frosts, but almost all have varieties that have been developed for short season areas.**

**After Two Years:**

If things are still bad after two years its time to shift to all heirloom varieties. You will now have enough experience under your belt to start seed saving. Take into consideration all of the above and apply it to your heirloom seed purchases. Get twice as much as you’ll think you’ll need and get even more corn because you will be using it for flour, meal, whole, and for animal feed. Also buy enough been and pea seed to plant large plots. A half-acre of beans could supply a family all winter. Dried beans are an excellent winter food in soups and for baked beans. The left over vines can be cured and used as winter fodder for pigs, goats, horses, cows, rabbits, and sheep.

**Animal Feed**

If you are raising all your own produce chances are your going to really want some farm animals for milk, eggs, and meat. But how do you feed those bottomless pits without commercial feed stores? Planning ahead for growing animal feed is a good idea. Some seed varieties for high quality animal feed that is easy to grow is:

**Sunflowers:** Every part of the plant is edible to pigs, horses, goats, and cows. Rabbits love the leaves and chickens love the seed heads. Some farmers in poor areas grow this in place of grain for animal feed.

**Pumpkins:** This has been used for years as winter animal fodder. It’s high in protein, easy to grow/harvest/store and most animals seem to love it. Especially goats, pigs, and cows.

**Mangle Beets:** Good pig fodder

**Corn:** Excellent grain for fattening animals. Can be cracked for all animals and fed as grain ration or to fatten for butcher. The stalks can be fed to horses, cattle, pigs, and goats but care must be taken to prevent mold.

**Potatoes:** Easy to grow/store and high in nutrition but must be cooked before feeding to animals

**Peas:** Most animals will eat the vines as well as the pods. Think about planting a late fall field and turning pig out in it all winter. Do not use the cut flower variety, as these are poisonous!

**Turnips:** Good pig feed

**Carrots:** Most animals love them

**How to store seeds**

Your seeds should always be in a cool/dark/dry place. Also a big consideration is temperature variations. The more the temps fluctuate the more your seeds loose viability. A basement works best because it stays cool and dark and the temperature stays steady. The freezer is not a good choice because of temperature/humidity fluctuations and the chance of a power outage that causes water to get into the seed packets.

Heat sealing your seeds in the original packages would be a good idea so that you have the planting instructions and varieties readily available. [**JWR Adds:** Seeds are living things, so they need some oxygen. It is fine to heat seal their bags, but *do not* vacuum seal them.] Seeds won't do you much good if you plant them incorrectly. Then putting them in some sort of air tight and waterproof container with a few oxygen and moisture absorbers would be smart. Putting the packages in an unused paint can would ensure no water would be able to get in them and new paint cans can be picked up relatively cheaply at auto paint supply stores. Paint cans are tough and sealable but also open easy enough with a flat head screwdriver.

**Books that are helpful for seed saving knowledge and basic gardening:**

[Gardening When It Counts: Growing Food in Hard Times](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/086571553X?ie=UTF8&tag=survivalcom-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=086571553X) by Steve Solomon: This is absolutely essential; it specifically focuses on survival gardening and seed saving.

[All New Square Foot Gardening](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1591862027?ie=UTF8&tag=survivalcom-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1591862027) by Mel Bartholomew: Very good on intensive gardening but remember that the more intensive you get the higher the water and nutrient needs there will be.

[The Encyclopedia of Country Living](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570615535?ie=UTF8&tag=survivalcom-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1570615535) by Carla Emery: This book has sections on every type of garden crop production as well as how to preserve it, save seed from it, and cook it.

 **Recommended Seeds Companies**

[**Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds**](http://www.rareseeds.com) - Good selection of tomatoes, winter squash, and heirloom corn. These are quality seeds and are shipped quickly. I’ve been using them for years and have always had excellent germination and good harvests. Great customer service and a free illustrated catalog.

[**Gurneys**](http://www.gurneys.com) - Very good quality seeds with some heirloom varieties

[**American Seed Company**](http://www.plantationproducts.com) - I found out through research that the brand name seeds are sold in the cheaper packs just like brand name cereals are the same as the generics. Your paying for the label. If you have a business you can order seed packages at cost with no shipping charges (as long as you order a kiosk). I was able to order over 1,500 packages for $180. That worked out to 12 cents per pack. I have been using these seeds for years and have always had great germination, vigorous plants, and good yields.

**Conclusion**
Your survival seed plan is something to really think about. This pre-planning may save your families life and should not be taken lightly. Do your research and when in doubt buy more than you’ll think you’ll need.