

Collecting Seeds

When we plant our prairies, we collect most of the seed ourselves. It ensures the seed is coming from an environment it likes to grow in (aka [local ecotypes](#)) and it saves money. The biggest benefit is that it's fun! When we began our prairie education, we learned the plants "backwards," meaning that we learned their names and their habitat in the fall by collecting them. In many cases, we had no idea what color the bloom was.

Basic rules of collecting:

- Make sure you have permission to collect on the land
- Collect no more than 50% of the target species
- If there are less than 10 target plants only collect 50% from half of those
- Only collect if the seeds are mature; be sure to test for readiness each time you go out to collect
- Know what the seed looks like so you know how to check if it's ready – when ripe, most seeds are dark (brown or black) but there are a few that are white or light colored.

How can one tell if the seed is ready to be collected?

Plants need time to send nutrients to their seeds. If those seeds are not hard, the plant is not finished with them and you risk wasting resources collecting seeds that aren't viable. Test for maturity by pressing your thumbnail into the seed. If it's hard, it's ready to be collected.

Equipment Needed

I tried a variety of equipment throughout the years and found that the following works best for me.

- Stihl PP30 hand clippers with leather holder
- Reusable zip ties or large carabiners
- 5 gallon buckets
- Click-together belt made of seatbelt-type material
- Gloves – I prefer the Atlas brand – they are washable and come in a variety of colors
- Large size white feed bags
- Paper lunch-size bags
- Various size plastic bins, swimming pools, plastic sleds, and/or tarp



Stihl PP30 clippers with holder and the click-together belt

Seed Collecting Methods

For most plants, it's clear how to collect them, but certain seeds are collected in a particular fashion. Mostly, you want to minimize the plant material you collect while maximizing your time collecting. One way I do this is to gather large clusters of the seed heads into a bundle and snip them at once. When gathering seeds that are in pods, do not tip the pods upside down until they over your collecting bucket. Here are a few that you need to collect differently:

1. Grasses – these should be stripped from the head with your hands in an upward motion. Always go the same direction as the seeds. Grasses do not hammermill well, so if you don't use this method, you're in for a long and tedious cleaning process!
2. Thimbleweed (*Anemone cylindrica* and *Anemone virginiana*) – strip the cottony seed head off with your hand, leaving the stems.
3. Purple meadow-rue (*Thalictrum dasycarpum*) – just rub the plant's head over a bucket. A good friend of mine called it “caressing the plant.”
4. Evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*) and Tall bellflower (*Campanula americana*) – turn the seed head upside down in your bucket and smack it on the sides.
5. White wild indigo (*Baptisia alba*) – cup your hands on either side of the long stem of seed pods and pull upwards, releasing the pods into your hands. They might have weevils in them, which will need to be killed so the seeds aren't eaten. To do this, you put a moth ball in the bucket and cover the bucket with a towel for a day or so.

I collect into a bucket. When my bucket is full, I dump them into a feed bag or a plastic tote. I will carry lunch bags with me inside the bucket to collect smaller amounts. Carry a Sharpie and label the bags as you collect!

Once home, the seeds are spread to dry. Each receives a label; this label follows them throughout the process until they are mixed in preparation for sowing. Each day turn the seeds to ensure they dry thoroughly.



Seeds drying in a variety of containers

Some plants “shoot” their seeds out of their pods as they dry. Flowering spurge (*Euphorbia corollata*), lupine (*Lupinus biennis*) and phlox (*Phlox pilosa*) do this. When drying them, we lay screening material over the top; as they dry and pop the seeds remain in the container. Clothes pins, binder clips, or a heavy-ish piece of wood will secure screening material sufficiently.



When drying in the sun but be sure the containers are secure should the wind come up.

Once the seeds are dried, they will need to be [cleaned](#) by having the chaff removed, leaving mostly seed remaining.