



# Lake County Seed Collection Guide

## For Native Gardeners

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version 1 8/2021

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The pictures in this guide were assembled to help native gardeners identify ripe seeds of native species. The squares are 1” on a side in the indoor shots with white squares on the gray background. The seed shots are on a metric scale (mm divisions). Names used are those of Flora of the Chicago Region by Gerould Wilhelm and Laura Rericha. Our heartfelt thanks go to Laurie Ryan of the McHenry County Conservation District for her review.

### Harvest notes

Successful collection of viable seed requires an understanding of when to collect, how to collect, how to store, how to process, and when to sow. Determine these criteria and have a plan before harvesting seeds, especially of uncommon species. The species are listed in order of the photo dates, so will give an approximate time for collection, but collection dates vary according to local weather effects on blooming and pollinators; proximity to Lake Michigan; slopes; sun vs shade, etc. Many seed harvest charts are available with collection dates, but it is best to scout each site rather than relying on historic dates.

Seeds collected before mid-June should be sown right away. They are intolerant of dry storage and most of them require both warm & cold treatments to stimulate germination. Late June seeds are more tolerant of dry storage; sow these seeds soon, but you can let them dry for a few weeks. Seeds ripening July and later can be held for fall/winter sowing, sow by Jan 1<sup>st</sup> for best results.

**Collect ethically & sustainably.** Everything is protected in forest preserves, including seeds. Collection is only allowed by staff and volunteers in our restoration programs. If you are collecting within those programs, it is important to avoid overharvesting wild populations. For perennials: **leave 50% behind.** For annuals, biennials, rare, threatened, or endangered species: **collect only 10% of the seed.**

### Seed Groups

*Time sensitive groups – seeds disperse in a few days or weeks due to wildlife, sensitivity to wind, etc.*

**Elaiosomes** are “ant candy” attached to the seeds. Ants are strong and motivated, able to quickly carry the candy back to their home and tossing the heavy “candy wrapper” (seeds) into their compost piles. Check these species frequently; ants will rapidly collect all of the seeds. These seeds have higher germination when sown within a day or two.



**Ballistic** capsules catapult their babies away, up to 30 feet! Search YouTube for “exploding seeds” to see these in action. To harvest: learn the ripening sequence & harvest just before explosion; store in a \*sealed\* paper bag or mesh bag for a day or two. Another option is to cover the seed heads with mesh hoods (\*after flowers wilt\*) to contain the seeds. Snip the entire stem after the seeds have popped, and carefully open the hoods indoors.



**Fluffy** seeds are quite common, allowing for wind to efficiently move seeds over long distances. Collect when fluffy. It is ok to collect these seeds \*slightly\* early, by collecting entire stems with seeds that are either fully poofed or have dropped their ray florets (the colorful "petals"); snip the stems and let them poof in a paper or mesh bag. Spring fluffy seeds are typically more sensitive to strong weather.



**Milkweed** seeds are ripe when pods are split open & seeds are brown. Ignore the pod color. Pro tip: rubber band the unripe pods, to prevent seeds from flying away.



**Berries** turn a vibrant color when ripe, as an advertisement to the wildlife to EAT ME and disperse the seed. Collection window is small for some of these seeds. These species need to be sown fresh in damp soil OR cleaned & stored in plastic in the refrigerator (which maintains a higher level of humidity). The natural process of a seed stored in a juicy berry, followed by chewing, digestion, and dispersal in a pile of “fertilizer” means these seeds are not used to completely drying out.





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*Mama's Boys will remain on the stem for a while, often for weeks.*

**Shakers** drop seeds very close to the mother plant, when shaken loose by the wind or a passing critter. Usually a Mama's Boy, unless strong weather occurs.

**Beaks** are a subset of the shaker group, with seed capsules that split open like a beak when the seeds are ripe. Collect when beaks are open.

**Coneheads** are flowers with a cone-shaped center. Imagine these flowers without their colorful parts, and you know exactly what they look like when seeds are ripe. Seeds are inside the hard cone.

**Crumbly Coneheads** are cone-shaped or thimble-shaped. Softer than standard coneheads, they crumble when ripe and are easily stripped by hand.

**Shattering** seeds can be tough to visually judge for ripeness. Use a \*gentle\* touch test to see if the seeds easily loosen. Spring seeds remain green (perhaps for camouflage) and swell slightly. Fall seeds typically turn brown or beige when ripe. Often found in colonies, these seeds do not travel far on their own. Some of these species drop quickly & are not Mama's Boys.

**Hitchhikers** are easy to tell when ripe – they hitch a ride on your pants! Color can be an indicator, but not always.

