

Seeds Are the Future

BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES

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“Recipes, instruction manuals, last testaments: by making seeds the plant condenses itself, or at least everything it knows, into a form compact and durable enough to survive winter, a tightly sealed bottle of genetic memory dropped onto the ocean of the future.” Michael Pollan

For gardeners who grow their plants from seed, seeds are the promise of good things to come—tomatoes, spinach, summer flowers. If trees are your thing, the promise is much larger... and the wait much longer. To immigrants leaving the familiar behind, they bring the look, taste and fragrance of the past into an uncertain future. To birds and other creatures in winter months, they are sheer survival.

Most of us don't think much about seeds until the rest of their plant structure has faded. But midwinter they're the visible remains of the summer's bounty and their bright berries or tan or chocolate brown seeds give visual interest to snow-covered landscapes.

Even the most superficial glance reveals amazing diversity in the way plants condense and pass on their genetic history. Don't expect a horticultural treatise here, but on a winter's day they're worth a closer look. Here's just a small sampling of the amazing variety of seed forms in our winter landscapes.



Seeds Overhead

- We don't tend to think of pine cones as seedpods but, for birds with specially curved beaks, they're a hidden pantry they alone can reach.
- Winter tree ornaments include the long narrow seedpods of Kentucky coffeetree and *Catalpa*, the shorter ones of redbud, the spiky balls of sweetgum.
- For something worth keeping in your pocket, you can't do much better than a lucky buckeye. They have an appealing, waxy sheen that begs to be rolled between your fingers.
- Acorns may have already been “squirreled away,” but a few damaged ones likely remain.
- The red, shriveled berries of crabapple and viburnums are some of the last to disappear—many of which need to go through a series of freeze-thaw cycles before wildlife will eat them.

Ground Level Seeds

- Coneflowers, prairie clover and many other prairie plants remain stiff and upright, offering a mid-winter food source for birds above the snow.
- The spikes of *Liatris* and other plants ripen to fluff and seed themselves around.
- Peony seeds take the form of joker's hats while poppy and lotus store their seeds in flat-topped vessels.
- While most seedheads take a discernible form, those of Illinois bundleflower look like they were grabbed and bundled tightly together.
- Cattails are by now unbunched to spread far and wide.
- It's no surprise that *Baptisia* seedheads were used as baby rattles, with their seeds loose and noisy in the fat pods.
- The airy seedheads of milkweed and clematis are perfectly designed for wind dispersal.

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Photo shows seedheads, top to bottom, of clematis, bundleflower and poppy.