



The Work of Squirrels (& Birds)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Have you ever seen a squirrel burying an acorn? Squirrels and some species of bird will **cache**, or hide nuts and seeds for winter by burying them under soil, leaves, and mulch. Compared to the other seasons, winters in areas where it is cold and snowy offer less food, so it's important to store food away for future use. Humans too will often can and preserve their harvest and save it for later.

The habit of squirrels and birds storing food in various locations underground benefits more than just the individual animals themselves; many seeds and nuts are forgotten, and thus this practice becomes a form of **seed dispersal** - many trees will sprout where they have been planted by these furry and feathered creatures.



ACTIVITY 1 - Seed Dispersal

Plant seeds are spread in various ways - some by gravity alone (being dropped to the forest floor), some via wind, others by animals, pressure pods, or floating in water to a new location.

You will need:

- ❖ (A) Miscellaneous items from around the house OR
- ❖ (B) various seeds from the yard

Instructions:

- 1.) (A) Collect a number of items, of various shapes and sizes, from around the house OR (B) try to find a variety of seeds outside.
- 2.) (A) Pretend that these objects are seeds and imagine how they would be distributed or dispersed, based on their characteristics. For example, a bowling ball is heavy, so it would likely fall to the ground and get embedded/partially planted right where it falls. In contrast, something lightweight, such as a wisp of paper, could get blown a great distance by wind. (B) If you collected seeds outside, see what you can observe about them, and try to determine which dispersal method transported them to where you found them.
- 3.) Do you know of seeds that are relocated by animals in other ways besides being carried and buried for the purpose of eating later?

ACTIVITY 2 - Saving (& Planting) Seeds

You will need:

- ❖ Plants/seeds or bulbs

Instructions:

Collect seeds from some of your favorite plants, save them in a way that will keep them alive until when they need to be planted, and plant them (either in fall or spring, depending on what's recommended for the species; for example, garlic bulbs should overwinter in the ground so a good time to plant them is now!). Perhaps you could plant some acorns - some might be gobbled by hungry critters this winter, but a few might sprout into small oak tree seedlings in the spring!

EXPERIMENT/EXTENSION

If you want to take it a step further, conduct an experiment to answer the question: Which conditions are the best for _____ seeds? (Fill in the blank with the type you've collected.) To do this, collect at least 20 of the same type of seed. Save four in each of five different ways - different temperatures, at different mediums, planting at different times, etc. Come up with your procedure ahead of time, then follow it - be sure to note any changes; label each method and record your results over the next several months.

Another option would be to try growing plants from cuttings or seeds of fruits or vegetables you've eaten. For example, romaine lettuce will regrow if cut a certain way and the root end placed in water. I've collected sprouting seeds from a grapefruit and gotten them to grow.

RELATED WEBSITES

- [Seed Savers Exchange: How to Save Seeds](#)
- [20 Vegetables You Can Re-Grow From Scraps](#)

Thanks for joining me for this week's Home Explorer activities from the Umpqua Watersheds Education Program. There will be new lessons, projects, crafts (and more) posted weekly!

With smiles :)
~ Miss Ryan

