

HOW TO USE AN ISOLATION CAGE

Isolation cages are a great tool to use in the seed savers garden. They are ideal for plants that are self fertile but that can also be cross pollinated by insects such as chillies, aubergines and peppers. Bigger cages can be used for beef tomatoes and used in conjunction with hand pollination, they are also useful for saving pure seeds from melons and cucumbers.

USING A CAGE FOR PEPPERS, CHILIES, AUBERGINES OR BEEF TOMATOES.

Select a strong healthy plant. If the plant has already started to flower, remove all open flowers and any fruits that have formed. Place the cage over the whole plant. Place rocks or earth around the bottom of the cage to make sure no insects can sneak in underneath. In a few days have a look to see if any fruits have started to form. You can be absolutely confident that these fruits will contain pure seeds as they have self pollinated in isolation. Once you have enough fruits on the plant for your seed crop, remove the cage. It is now free to be used on another plant. Tie a piece of brightly coloured string or wool around the stalk of each fruit. Make sure you don't tie it too tight. The stem will swell as the fruit grows bigger and if the wool is too tight it will strangle the fruit and cause it to drop off. Now you can leave the plant in peace and eat any unmarked fruits. Leave the marked fruits on the plant until they are fully mature and harvest the seeds as your seed crop.

USING A CAGE FOR MELONS OR CUCUMBERS

A bigger cage may be required for melons or cucumbers. Select your plants. Remove any open flowers or formed fruit. Place the cage over the whole plant. It may be best to cage more than one plant to ensure a better diversity of pollen. Cucumbers and melons have male and female flowers. You will need to identify which is which. The female flowers will have a tiny fruit at the base. Transfer male pollen to the female flowers either by breaking off the male stamen and rubbing it into an open female flower or by using a fine brush. Replace the cage to prevent insects bringing in foreign pollen. Hand pollination is not always successful and may need to be repeated. When you are happy with the number of fruits forming on the plant, remove the cage and mark the pure fruits with brightly coloured string. Now you can eat any unmarked fruits but allow the marked fruits to go beyond maturity and harvest your seed crop.

OTHER USES FOR ISOLATION CAGES

Isolation cages are handy things to have around. They can be placed over brassica or rocket plants as the seeds ripen to stop the birds eating them all. They can also be used to shelter young trees from the frost. Placed over young plants, they can protect them from predators until they get established.