

Winter Seed Sowing



Winter sowing is a very simple concept. You start seeds outdoors in containers in winter and let Mother Nature do the rest. When spring comes, as the soil temperatures gradually increase, your seeds take the cue from nature as to when it's time to germinate. If you can grow food where you live, you can use the winter sowing method in jugs to grow your seedlings. It's super easy!

Benefits

There are several benefits to this method – first of all, you don't need to purchase any special equipment, like grow lights or heat mats. You don't need to dedicate space in your house/greenhouse to grow the seedlings. And the seedlings don't need an extended hardening off process because Mother Nature naturally hardens them off as they grow outdoors.

Types of seeds to grow

You can sow any annual, perennial, or biennial plants and flowers, herbs, or vegetables that will grow in our area. People have even grown warm season crops like tomatoes and peppers with this method! For beginners, we recommend selecting seeds that require cold stratification (many perennials and native plants), hardy annuals, and vegetables/herbs that are frost-tolerant or early germinators.

When to start

There's no strict schedule like there is for starting seeds indoors, but the important thing is to wait until after freezing temperatures are here to stay. A general rule of thumb for our climate:

- Late December thru February: perennials, hardy annuals, natives, and these veggies/herbs: spinach, kale, Brussels sprouts, peas, broccoli, thyme, salvia, oregano, cilantro
- March: tender annuals and these veggies/herbs: lettuce, bok choy, beets, carrots, basil, parsley
- April: (if you want to give this a try!) warm-season veggies – beans, cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, squash, etc.

But when is it too late to start? If you are sowing seeds that require cold stratification (like many native seeds), plan to sow those at least 4-5 weeks before it gets above freezing outside. If your seeds don't require cold dormancy in order to grow, then you don't have to worry as much about starting too late. Some people even continue this process for starting seeds for succession plantings throughout the summer!

Materials

- Milk or juice jugs, pop bottles, water jugs – clear or translucent white only
- Soilless potting mix (NOT moisture control mix)
- Drill (or torch and Phillips screwdriver)
- Sharp knife
- Spray bottle
- Seeds
- Plastic plant tags and paint pen, garden marker, or grease pen
- Duct tape and packing tape

Prepare the jugs

Rinse out the jugs. Drill about 8-10 small holes in the bottom and bottom side of the jugs to allow for drainage. Alternatively, you poke holes in the jug with a Phillips head screwdriver that has been heated with a torch (be careful!)

Cut horizontally around the jugs, leaving 2 inches uncut under the handle as a hinge (see picture on next page).

Fill base of each jug with 3-4 inches of very damp potting soil.

Press the seeds gently, sprinkle with soil lightly. (You DON'T need to follow the seed packet instructions for spacing. Winter sown seedlings are hardy! You can place lots of seeds in the container, up to an entire packet of seeds, although 1-2" apart is generally good spacing. You can break off chunks of plants when you are ready to transplant.)

Spray the surface with water. Place a plant tag inside each jug (for extra security in case the outer label fades).

Tape it closed with duct tape, leaving no gaps (gaps can let in cold wind). For extra protection, to ensure that the jugs remain shut over the winter, cover the duct tape with packing tape. Throw out the little screw lid – you don't need it!

Mark the outside of each jug with plant information.



Set outside

Place your jugs outside on the ground in the open in a somewhat shady spot where they will be exposed to rain and snowfall, which will give it the moisture it needs.

You're done for now - leave them alone! You don't need to do anything until spring. The snow will fall into and onto the jugs, which will provide moisture, and the greenhouse effect of the containers will allow condensation and evaporation. The on and off freezing and thawing of winter and spring will soften your seeds naturally, helping them sprout sooner.

Monitor seedlings in spring

In the spring, check your jugs periodically. Water them only when no condensation is present and the jugs are light to lift. Gently showering water over the top of the jugs will be sufficient.

Eventually, you will see the seedlings starting to emerge. At this point, beware of late frosts! Once your seedlings have emerged, if you may be getting a late frost, throw a blanket over your jugs for the night.

Continue to monitor and water the plants whenever no condensation is present and the jugs are light to lift.

After your seedlings are a good size and the days are sunny and warmer, un-tape the jugs and open them to harden them off. Do this over several days, remembering to close the jugs back up each night. You can lightly re-tape the jugs if they don't want to stay closed.

Transplant: annuals (veggies, annual flowers)

You can transplant your hardier annual seedlings as soon as the soil is workable. Wait to transfer tender annuals and warm season crops until after the threat of frost has passed.

Transplant late in the day or in the shade to protect. Break into clumps. Water well. Your newly transplanted seedlings might have transplant shock, but they will perk back up within 24-48 hours. You can thin when the plants are ready.

Transplant: perennials and natives

Most perennials and natives are slower growing than annuals. These longer-lived plants spend much of the first year or two of their lives developing a root system. Because of this slower growth, we recommend that you pot up your perennial and native seedlings and allow them to continue to grow and establish their roots in pots through the summer. It is much easier to keep them watered and watch their growth when they are right outside your back door.

To do this, separate the seedlings and plant into individual 4-inch pots in June. Leave the pots in a sunny location. Water as needed throughout the summer. If you have problems with critters, you can cover the pots with hardware cloth.

In September, after the temps have cooled, you can transplant your seedlings to their permanent location. Make sure to mark with a durable label so that you can find your plants in early spring and watch them emerge from the earth.

Let's grow together, Door County!

The Door County Seed Library is a collaborative community program of the Door County Master Gardeners Association that offers free seeds and educational programs.

Find us at your local Door County Library branch and special events.



Version: September 7, 2024