

WINTER SEED SOWING

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Do you enjoy starting seeds? Do you need to start seeds for events like plant sales? Do you want to start seeds but you can't accommodate shelves and lights indoors? Do you want to start seeds but you have cats that will decapitate your seedlings? Don't want water marks ruining you dining room table? Then Winter Sowing is the method for you! Read on to learn about the easiest way to start seeds during winter, outdoors. Another interesting thing about Winter Sowing is that it really opens up growing natives to many more gardeners. Sometimes it is hard to find native plants locally. This method opens that door for more enthusiasts.

What is Winter Sowing? This method of starting seeds is done outdoors during winter. It is best for seeds that need to be stratified (a short cold period) to germinate. By winter sowing you are taking advantage of the natural temperature fluctuations and length of day to trigger germination. Germination rates are usually quite high. The advantages of winter sowing are many! You do not need seed trays, lights; treat your soil for damping-off disease or worry about your seedlings drying out. Best of all is no daily watering!

Start with milk jugs, clear water jugs or deep plastic food containers with clear lids. When you finish putting the container, soil and seeds together, you will in essence, have made a small greenhouse. The container does not matter as long as light can penetrate the plastic and it is deep enough for proper root development.

When to start? For our area (Chicagoland, Zone5b), any seed that is perennial, a reseeding (hardy) annual or plants that need stratification can be sown from the beginning of winter until spring. Tender annuals and veggies should be sown a little closer to the beginning of spring. For example, I grow a huge variety of plants. I start my native perennials in January through February. I start hardy annuals in March and towards the end of March and even into the first week of April, I start tender annuals. This method will not give you earlier vegetables/ plants. What it does do is give you really strong seedlings to plant at the appropriate time.

Items you will need:

- Milk jugs or plastic containers that allow light to pass, at least 3" deep
- Bleach, water/ hot soapy water
- Large (long) rubber band and Ruler
- Box cutter and Utility scissors
- Potting soil/mix (no water polymers, no fertilizer, no garden soil, no seed mix)
- Garden marker (waterproof, UV resistant), plant pens or grease pencil



Seeds

Plant labels

Long handle spoon (or similar device)

Clear poly tape, wide masking tape or duct tape

Watering Bottles or watering trays



Directions: Gather your supplies during summer and fall.

1. Clean all of your containers with a 10% bleach solution and allow them to dry. Hot water and dish soap will also work.

2. Drainage: Using a boxcutter or paring knife cut 4-6 1" long "V" shaped cuts in the bottom of the container for drainage.

3. Mark 4" off the table on the side of your container. 4" will be your soil level and 4" is also your cutting line. Place the rubber band around the jug and use the marker to draw a line at 4" from the table. That is your cut line. On a milk jug the cut line should start right next to the base of the handle. Keep the handle intact.

4. Using your box knife, cut a starter slit along your 4" line. Use your utility scissors to cut the remaining line around the jug ** leave the area at the handle alone, that is your hinge. It is very important to leave a hinge. It makes taping up the jug much easier.

5. Fill with dampened potting soil up to the 3.5" height. Most seedlings need a few inches to start strong deep roots. Use your fingers to tamp down the soil a little to get the air out and add a little more soil. Then fluff soil up. You should have nearly 4" of potting mix when you finish.

6. Plant your seeds. The number of seeds that get planted in the container depends on how large the seeds are and how many plants you need. If you place the seeds with a bit of space in between, you won't need to thin. It is not something you should have to do. Certainly, a whole package of any seed is too many in a milk jug. The larger the plant, the fewer seeds that should be planted. Think- hollyhock vs. carrot seedlings. Also consider how many plants you actually need. Plant what you need plus a few more. Use two jugs if you need a lot of one species. Cover the seeds according to the seed package. A good rule of thumb if you don't have that information is 1/4" to 1/2" potting mix over the seeds.

7. Label the container right away! Use your outdoor marker or paint pen on the outside of the container. Make a label for the inside too. At some point you will open the jug and discard the top. Therefore, labeling the inside is necessary. Another good secondary labeling practice is to label the bottom of the jug. Use a piece of duct tape, do not cover your drainage holes.

8. Time to close up your mini greenhouse! Using your poly tape or duct tape, cut a 2" long strip and attach vertically from the top of the jug to the bottom and close the gap. Now cut 2 8" long strips to tape around the seam. The tape should not have any gaps, press it down all the way around. It needs to keep warm air inside.

9. A spoon with a long handle is useful in smoothing the tape to the jug from the inside. Place your hand on the outside of the jug and stick the spoon handle in the jug, run the tip around the cut line and press from the outside at the same time. If you use duct tape, you probably don't need to do this step.

10. Do not place the cap on the jug. You do not need it. Jugs need to vent excess heat on sunny days (like a greenhouse). Take your jugs outside to a protected sunny area right away! Waiting a few days can initiate germination. Placing them in milk crates keeps them from blowing away. Wait for germination.

11. Water the jug if the soil looks dry. Monitor condensation on the inside of the jug. If it begins to disappear- time to water! This will be necessary on very sunny, dry winter days above 30 degrees. This will be necessary later as the weather warms up and the soil dries out faster. An easy way to do this is to set the jugs into a shallow tray of water. You can also make a water bottle- watering can. Look online for directions. I water my jugs on average 7-10 times during the winter until I open them. Then I use the garden hose to water.

When the plants are bigger, during April, the top of your jug can be opened. On cold nights before planting out, the jugs should be closed up but not re-taped, this protects the plants from being nipped by frost. By mid-May the top of the jug can be removed permanently.

At the appropriate time for each type of plant, plant them in the ground or in pots to share. Keep seed packages or look up planning instructions on the internet.

The last word on your containers. They should be deep enough for proper root development. Shallow food containers will dry out faster as well as not allow for long root development. However, if you plan on transplanting quickly you can use whatever plastic containers you'd like. Some containers can be used from year to year. That is great, but not necessary. You are reusing the jugs before you recycle them anyway. There will always be more containers. I like being able to cut that top off my jugs without worrying about keeping the jug from year to year. Just make sure that jug gets recycled and not thrown away. Happy Plantings!

Resources:

Hort4U on YouTube for a video class

Winter Sowing Forum On Facebook: Winter Sowers

The Seed site (germination rates)

Tom Clothier.hort.net (germination rates)

To the right is an alternate way of cutting your milk jugs. This takes less time, effort and tape.

