

## Your Garden - Growing from Seed

With all the plants available on the market these days, both from garden centres and mail order, you might wonder why anyone would bother to grow from seed. There are a few answers to this one but some of the basic ones are:

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Personal satisfaction - there's nothing quite like seeing a garden full of plants that you grew yourself from a tiny seed.

- Cost - if you have a large garden and want it full of bright flowers for the summer then the cheapest way is to grow your own bedding plants.

- Choice - garden centres are great but in reality, they can't stock a fraction of the varieties available from specialist nurseries.

So if you fancy giving it a try, even if only in a small way, then this is what you will need to get started with seeds that need propagation indoors before planting out:

- Seed trays, pots (or old margarine tubs, if you like, but trays are best). If you have a greenhouse or potting shed then those with drainage holes in the bottom are fine but if you're propagating your seeds on a windowsill then you'll be better off with the sort without drainage holes.

- Seed tray covers. These aren't strictly necessary but they do help to keep warmth and moisture in during the propagation period and it saves messing around with plastic bags or film.

- Potting compost. Do buy compost especially for seeds. All purpose compost is inclined to be a bit coarse for really tiny seeds.

- Somewhere fairly constantly warm for germination (around 70°F, 20°C). If you want to grow your seeds in a greenhouse, you may need to consider heating it. Otherwise, an indoor windowsill should be alright or if you don't think that yours is warm enough, you can buy heated propagators or heated mats to put underneath seed trays.

- Labels to stick on or in each pot or tray so that you know what's in it.

Before you even open the seed packets, check the instructions. Some seeds need to be soaked, frozen or treated in some other way before use.

In general, one seed tray will accommodate one packet of seeds. Some, more specialised seeds come in much smaller quantities and a half size tray or a pot will be adequate.

Fill your container with compost to within about ¼ inch from the top then dampen it. I find that a spray bottle is ideal for this. You don't want the compost absolutely soaking wet or your seeds will rot. Either sprinkle the seeds all over the surface of your compost or make drills one inch apart with a pencil or your finger and sprinkle the seeds evenly into these. For larger seeds, you may need to make a small hole and drop each seed in individually. According to the instructions, either cover your seeds gently with more compost or leave exposed.

Dampen your compost again with the spray or a very fine trickle of water and unless it says otherwise on the packet, make some sort of mini greenhouse for your container. You can put plastic film over the top or put the whole tray into a

clear plastic bag. For pots, you can slip a plastic bag over the top and hold in place with elastic bands.

Put your trays etc. in the aforesaid warm place, but not in direct sunlight, and wait for your seeds to grow. Depending on what they are, this could be days or weeks - it will usually tell you on the packet. In the meantime, check daily for sufficient water. If the plastic covering has water droplets inside you can be fairly sure that your compost is moist enough. If in doubt, feel gently with your finger. The soil should be damp, not wet!

When your seedlings start to appear and have grown a very tiny bit (not much more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch), remove the plastic covering. From this point on, you will need to be even more vigilant that your trays don't dry out. I still advocate using the spray bottle for watering tiny seedlings - but be very careful, they will be fragile. If you are using draining trays or peat trays, you can water from the bottom if you prefer.

When your seedlings have developed 4 or 6 leaves and look a bit sturdier, you must thin them out to about one inch apart, in trays or pots. Prepare fresh trays or pots of compost - the next one on from seed compost. Separate the seedlings, using the tip of a pencil or the handle of a teaspoon to loosen them from the tray or pot. You must treat them with the utmost care as they are easily damaged at this stage. Gently tease the roots apart and try to only hold the leaves rather than the stems. Make holes in your newly-prepared compost and pop each seedling into a hole, gently firming down the soil around them. Some seedlings react very badly to transplanting and may look as though they are dying. Fear not, after a day or so, if they are kept moist and out of direct sunlight, they will be fine.

The new plants can now stay in these trays or pots until you are ready to put them into the ground or their outdoor containers. Keep them moist and give a little liquid feed at weekly intervals. If the plants look as though they are getting leggy, they don't have enough light and must be moved.

Seed planting is usually done early in the year (check packet for details). When the plants look quite sturdy and the weather has warmed up in spring, you can put your plants outside during the day to "harden" off. Make sure they are sheltered from heavy rain or wind. While the nights are still cold or there is a danger of frost, you will need to bring the plants in at the end of the day. Make sure that slugs and snails can't reach your new babies - a hungry slug can eliminate all your hard work at a sitting.

When all danger of frost has passed, you can put your plants in their permanent homes in your garden.

If you don't fancy all that fiddling around, there are a number of plants which can be sown from seed direct into the garden. To do this, make sure that the soil is a fine tilth, sow your seeds in rows or clumps and cover with a little soil. Water sparingly and when they have germinated and grown on a little, thin them out to whatever distance apart it says on the packet by discarding the weakest looking seedlings.

Whichever method you choose, you should have a lovely bright garden for the summer.

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Your Independent guide to Gardening