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Winter Sowing

Although the process has been around a long time, winter sowing of seeds has become a trend in the past several years, especially popular among those who don't have the inclination or equipment for indoor seed starting.

In theory, by winter sowing we will allow those hardy seeds that often self-sow on their own to grow in a controlled environment without competition from weeds, and with very little management from us.

There are many ways to manage the process, but one of the most successful involves using an empty gallon plastic jug. Rinse well to remove any milk or vinegar residue, then carefully cut the jug around the center of the perimeter, leaving the top attached to the bottom for about two inches near the handle. The handle then forms a hinge which allows opening and closing of the top. Next punch several holes in the bottom of the jug and add about four inches of very moist soilless potting soil in the bottom half of the jug.

Plant your seeds at the depth listed on the package. If you are planting saved seeds and aren't sure how deep to plant them, a general rule is to leave very small seeds on the surface, and cover larger seeds lightly with the soil mix. It is usually best to scatter small seeds thickly over the entire surface inside the jug, though larger seeds may be planted in a grid of about 9 seeds per jug. Press the seeds lightly, cover if necessary, and water them in to ensure good seed to soil contact.


Once planted, place a marker inside the jug with the variety, and it's also a good idea to mark the outside of the jug. Then fasten the top back in place using duct tape or twisties run through holes drilled in the top and the bottom. Remove and discard the cap from the jug and set the jugs outside in a sunny location.

Check the jugs from time to time and add water carefully down the sides only if the soil is dry. In the four years that I've done this, I've never had to add water because the snow and rain have been ample. When the air temperature rises above 55F, remove the tops of the jugs, but swing them back closed when the temps drop below freezing.

Once the seedlings are growing and their roots fill the soil in the jugs, carefully remove them and either plant directly in the garden or pot them in individual pots to grow on to larger size. Since the plants have been growing outdoors all along, no hardening-off is required.

Any native plant seed will do well with winter sowing, and many actually require 30 to 90 days of stratification (the cold, damp period) before germination will occur. Although a seed may require 30 days stratification, they are generally just as happy with a lot more, so don't hesitate to start their seeds in January. Some non-native flowering plants to try in January include daylilies (*Hemerocallis* sp.), astilbe, platycodon, iris, and hosta.

Non-native plants, especially vegetables, may be damaged by so much time in stratification. Cold-hardy plants such as onions may be started in February, along with herbs such as mint and thyme. The cabbage family (*brassica* sp.) will generally do well started in March, along with basil, marigolds, and zinnias. Wait until early April to attempt warm-weather crops such as tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant, or peppers



By winter sowing, you are, in effect, creating individual greenhouses for your seedlings. Snow and rain provide moisture, and freezing temperatures provide the chill needed for germination. If you have any doubt that this will work, think of self-sown seeds which often show up as volunteer plants in the garden without any effort at all from the gardener.

For more information on winter sowing:

<https://104homestead.com/winter-sowing-by-zone/>

<https://www.agardenforthehouse.com/what-to-winter-sow-and-when/>

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