

Winter Sowing: The Foolproof Way to Start Seeds Outdoors



Let's Get Growing! Winter Sowing for a Garden Bursting with Blooms!

Hey flower friends! Are you dreaming of sunshine and vibrant blooms while Old Man Winter is still hanging around? Well, I've got a little secret to share: winter sowing! It's the easiest, most budget-friendly way to give your garden a head start and have it bursting with color come summer.

Think of it as a little gardening magic you can work even when it's chilly outside. So, grab your seeds, recycle some containers, and let's get ready for a flower-filled season!

(Friendly photo of someone winter sowing)

Now, before we dive in, just a quick note: this post may contain affiliate links. If you decide to buy something through one of those links, I'll get a tiny commission at no extra cost to you. Thanks for your support!

What's This "Winter Sowing" All About?

Imagine giving your seeds a cozy winter vacation outdoors, all snuggled up in their own little recycled greenhouses! That's essentially what winter sowing is. It's a fantastic way to germinate seeds during the cold months without needing fancy grow lights or heat mats.

If you're short on indoor space for starting seeds, this method is your new best friend. All you need is some good quality potting mix, containers, seeds, and Mother Nature's chilly embrace! It's a proven way to cultivate a garden on the cheap, starting as early as late Fall and continuing through winter, depending on where you live. And yes, you can even use seeds from the dollar store!

Why Milk Jugs? They're a Winter Sowing Superstar!

Milk jugs (or water jugs) are the rockstars of winter sowing containers! They're readily available, and make perfect mini greenhouses, and offer some great advantages:

- **Plenty of room for roots:** Your little seedlings will have ample space to stretch out their roots and get comfy.
- **Growing room:** The height of the jug is just right for some of those taller plants that need a bit of a head start.
- **Sun protection:** The translucent plastic helps diffuse strong sunlight, protecting delicate seedlings from sunburn.

Grow Gorgeous Delphiniums from Seed!

Add height and elegance to your garden with delphiniums. Easily grown from seed and they return year after year!

The Magic of Winter Sowing: Why Bother?

There are so many fantastic reasons to try winter sowing!

- **Early blooms:** Many plants, especially biennials, won't flower until their second year unless you give them an early start. Winter sowing helps them bloom sooner!
- **Budget-friendly beauty:** Grow an amazing flower garden from affordable seeds! You'll get early blooms from your perennials and biennials, plus a fantastic head start on other plants.
- **Tougher plants:** Winter-sown plants tend to be stronger and hardier than those started indoors, so they'll be better equipped to handle transplanting.
- **Natural stratification:** Many seeds NEED a period of cold to germinate properly. Winter sowing takes care of that naturally, right in your container! Plus, they'll get the magic of vernalization too!

Wait, what are stratification and vernalization?

- **Vernalization:** Think of it as a wake-up call for seeds! The cold temperatures during germination help kickstart the flowering process when they're planted.
- **Stratification:** It's like mimicking nature's way of preparing seeds for growth. The cold and moist conditions break down the seed's dormancy, so it's ready to sprout when the time is right.

Some seeds with tough outer shells benefit from winter sowing as the warming and cooling, and even freezing, helps soften the shell, making germination easier.

Bonus: Plants grown this way usually don't need to be hardened off before transplanting. Talk about easy!

Which Seeds Are Winter Sowing Champs?

Generally, if a perennial plant is hardy in your climate, you

can safely winter sow its seeds. The seeds will patiently wait for warmer weather to sprout, and even if there's a late cold snap, they'll be just fine.

Best flowers for winter sowing:

List of winter sow flowers

Keep an eye out for clues on seed packets like "self-sows," "cold hardy," "withstands frost," or "direct sow early." Seed names containing words like "wildflower" or "weed" are often good candidates too!

When's the Best Time to Start?

Aim to winter sow your hardy perennials and annuals from December to March, keeping in mind your local temperatures and weather. These kinds of seeds thrive when they have a consistent period of cold, moist conditions before springtime germination.

Don't get too caught up in specific garden zones or sowing calendars. Your growing season is really determined by your first and last frost dates!

Zoning is relative. Though I am in zone 8, there are plenty in zone 5 that get warmer springs earlier than I do. Read all about garden zones.

Don't worry too much about zone specifics! Cold-hardy plants will remain dormant until the weather warms up enough, so they're not in a rush.

Winter Sowing in Action: Annuals and Perennials

(Include a picture of your sown plants)

Here's a peek at some cold-hardy annuals and perennials that

are thriving in my area. Many gardeners believe that winter sowing is the best way to grow native perennials from seed.

These little frozen sprouts are violas, larkspur, and California poppies, with a touch of feverfew thrown in for good measure. They self-seeded last fall and have been through a lot, weathering snow, rain, and even some freezing temperatures! Despite the unpredictable weather, they're patiently waiting for warmer days.

Let's Get Down to Business: Planting in Milk Jugs!

[Click here for articles, showing the best winter sowing containers](#)

How to Winter Sow Seeds in Milk Jugs (Step-by-Step)

1. **Gather your jugs:** You'll need some recycled 1-gallon milk or water jugs for this project.
 - **Pro tip:** While you can use other sizes, I prefer the 1-gallon jugs because their wider base makes them more stable and less likely to tip over.
2. **Wash and sanitize:** Give your jugs a good cleaning with a bleach solution. Fill your sink with hot water, add about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of bleach, and let the jugs soak for about half an hour. Rinse well and air dry.
3. **Create drainage:** Using a hot skewer, knife, or screwdriver, carefully poke plenty of drainage holes in the bottom of each jug.
4. **Make a hinge:** Near the base of the jug handle, make a horizontal slice. Then, using scissors, cut around the jug, leaving a $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch wide band beneath the handle to act as a hinge.

5. **Add soil:** Pour a few inches of potting mix into the bottom of the jug.

- **Pro tip:** More soil means more space for roots!

6. **Sow your seeds:** Sprinkle the seeds onto the surface of the soil and gently press them in. Good contact between the seeds and soil is important.

7. **Cover lightly:** Top with a thin layer of soil, vermiculite, or horticultural sand – but be sure to check your seed packet, as some seeds need light to germinate.

How deep should seeds be with winter sowing?

Just as with any seed sowing, seeds differ as to how deep they should be planted. This information should be on the seed packet and you plant accordingly.

- **Skip the fancy seed starting mix:** This method is pretty forgiving, and your winter-sown seeds are less prone to damping off. Good quality potting mix works just fine!

- **Avoid water-absorbing crystals:** Don't use potting soil with additives like water-absorbing crystals.

8. **Label, label, label:** Use a paint pen to write the name of the plant and the date on the container.

- **Pro tip:** Add an extra identification inside the container as well, in case the writing on the outside washes away.

9. **Seal it up:** Use duct tape to close the milk jug. It's more durable than packing tape. Write the plant's name on the duct tape, as markers tend to last longer on its surface.

10. **Water gently:** If the soil is dry, set the jug in a shallow dish of water and let it soak up from the bottom.

11. **Place them outdoors:** Find a semi-protected spot outside where the containers won't be blown over. You can even nestle them into the soil of a raised bed for extra stability.

- **Important:** Don't put the lids back on the jugs! The opening allows water and air to circulate. You don't need extra holes in the top of the jugs.

To most onlookers, this is not the most attractive thing to view, to me these milk jug greenhouses are gorgeous. Some will use milk crates to keep the jugs together and protected.

I know I will have tons of flowers to plant out this coming Spring for such a small price and that has got beautiful written all over it!

I used these raised beds for my vegetable garden all last summer and I loved them!

Other recycled containers you can winter sow in

I not only sow seeds in gallon jugs. Here are some other containers I have used.

I save different plastic containers that have separate lids already. I like the Organic Spring garden salad mix from Costco. (also available at many grocery stores)

I have also used these to start seeds in Spring, they work great for that too.

Once we have eaten up the salad I give the container a good wash in hot soapy water, dry then poke drainage holes in the bottom and a couple in the top with a hot skewer.

You want it to drain very well so make sure there are plenty of holes.

Must you use a specialty mix?

Seed Starting Mix vs Potting Soil

I did a test on whether using a specialty seed starting mix was superior to potting soil when starting seed. See how it turned out!

Or I use my DIY potting soil. I show you how I make it in this article.

I don't fill the clean salad container with the soil mix, I just use a few inches.

Water it well. This saves you from having to water after you have sown the seeds which can displace them if you are not very careful.

Many are listed in this post on cottage flowers that reseed themselves.

Here is a great selection of seeds at a great price, most can be winter sowed except the Zinnias and Sunflowers.

Once you have sown the seeds set the container into a tray of water and let it absorb from the bottom.

You can put these containers outside in the winter weather like the milk jugs, just make sure to pierce holes in the top of the containers.

Sometimes I keep the salad containers in my greenhouse or on my back porch.

Before you know it, you will have tons of seedlings ready to pot up or out into the garden. You should see seedlings in 6 to 8 weeks. (depending on conditions)

Taking Care of Your Winter Sown Babies

The best part? For most of the winter, you can practically forget about them! But once the weather starts to warm up,

here are a few things to keep in mind:

1. **Check for condensation:** On any sunny day when the temperature is above freezing, look for condensation inside the containers. If you don't see any, give them some water by setting the container in a shallow dish to absorb moisture from the bottom.
2. **Watch for sprouts:** Keep an eye out for seedlings! You might be surprised how early some of them start to germinate, even when it's still quite chilly.
3. **Ventilate:** As temperatures rise, you'll need to open the tops of the containers to prevent overheating. You can either open them during the day and close them at night, or find a location where they'll get morning sun and afternoon shade.
4. **Water regularly:** Once you start opening the containers, you'll need to keep a close eye on the moisture level. The soil can dry out quickly, especially if you're not getting much rain.

Planting Time!

Once the soil in your garden is workable and your winter-sown seedlings have developed their first true leaves, it's time to transplant them outdoors! For best results, wait until they've grown larger root systems and are nearly reaching the tops of their containers. Smaller seedlings are more vulnerable to stress and damage.

If you want to pot some up to grow on in larger pots or send them as gifts with the visitors this spring, visit [here](#): Go [here](#) for how to thin seedlings.

Get Ready for a Flower-Filled Garden!

There are tons of methods for sowing in winter. Have you tried winter sowing? If you have, how did it go for you?

Check out these budget-friendly seed-starting hacks!

I walk you through it all in my video!

(Link to your Store)

Happy winter gardening, my friends! I'm wishing you tons and tons of beautiful blooms this year!

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FAQs About Winter Sowing

(A list of FAQ at the bottom)

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