

WINTER SOWING 101

From: A Garden for the House by Kevin Lee Jacobs

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BELIEVE IT OR NOT You can start your summer garden in December and January, using a neat trick called "Winter-Sowing." Winter-sowing is an outdoor method of seed germination (invented by Trudi Davidoff) which requires just two things: miniature greenhouses (made from recycled water and milk jugs) and Mother Nature. You can winter-sow your way to a beautiful garden, too...for pennies.

Here's how:



Make a Greenhouse. You can make a greenhouse from any number of clear or translucent plastic containers. Like other winter-sowers, I use recyclables, including gallon-size milk and water jugs, and, on rare occasions, 2-liter soda bottles. With jugs and bottles, use a pen-knife to cut around the middle, almost all the way through. The uncut half-inch or so will serve as a hinge.

Next, punch out drainage holes in the bottom of the container. I use a Phillips screwdriver, heated over a flame at the stove, to facilitate the hole-punching job. Punch out also a few holes along the top portion of the jug. These extra holes provide ventilation. Ventilation is the key to preventing excess heat from building up in the greenhouse, and baking the seeds to death. Remove the cap from the jug or bottle.

Select the Right Soil. It is essential to use a light, fluffy, well-draining potting mixture. A commercial peat-moss and perlite mix is fine. Pour the soil, preferably to a depth of 2 to 3 inches, into the container.

Water the Soil. Moisten the mix thoroughly, and then let it drain.



Sow the Seeds. Sow your seeds on the soil surface. Cover the seeds with more soil, when necessary, in order to achieve the proper planting depth. Gently pat the mix down, so that seeds and soil make good contact. Then replace the lid, and secure it with a strip of duct tape, as illustrated above.

If you live in a cold climate, as I do, plant your perennial and hardy annual seeds first. Should these sprout during a weird warm-spell in winter, they will not be harmed. Wait until March to plant tender annuals. More details here: [What to Winter-Sow...& When.](#)

indicate with a permanent marker (or a paint-pen) the seed variety and date sown. Do not omit this step, for there is nothing worse than finding, in spring, dozens of miniature greenhouses brimming with seedlings, and not knowing what they are!

Bring the Greenhouse Outdoors. Your greenhouse is now ready to brave the outdoor elements. Select a location that is safe from strong wind, but where sun, rain and snow will be freely admitted. My assorted greenhouses go on a wire-mesh patio table, out of the reach of Lily the Beagle, who would otherwise knock them over.



For further protection from tipping, I place them in a large plastic box, with drainage holes melted in the bottom.



Relax! Now sit back and let Nature take over. As the weather chills and warms, your seeds will freeze and thaw. These natural actions loosen the seed-coatings. This is why advance soaking or nicking of hard-shelled seeds, such as Morning Glories and Sweet Peas, is not necessary when you winter-sow

At the first kiss of spring, but while begin to emerge. This is the time to the soil appears dry, moisten disturb tender root systems. Then like to open the tops for hours at a fresh spring air. The tops, of course,



way to achieve a beautiful garden.



nights are still freezing, seedlings will check for water. Open the tops, and if thoroughly but gently, so as not to close the tops. On warm, sunny days, I time, and let the seedlings enjoy the are closed at dusk.

I can't tell you how advantageous winter-sowing can be. Last year I produced an entire garden's-worth of perennials this way (far too many, in fact), without the need for light-systems, heating devices, or seed-starting kits. And, unlike windowsill-germinated seedlings, which more often than not are frail and spindly, winter-sown seeds grow up to be strong, sturdy plants, completely prepared for glorious careers in the open garden.

If I were you, I'd give winter-sowing a try. Honestly, it's the easiest, most cost-effective

WHAT TO SOW AND WHEN

January through February:

Flowering Perennials & Hardy Annuals
Digitalis purpurea (Wild Foxglove)
Oenothera speciosa (Evening Primrose)
Consolida (Larkspur) 'Galilee Blue Double'
Aquilegia (Columbine) 'Alpina' blue
Aquilegia 'Scarlet'
Aquilegia mixed
Aquilegia 'Crimson'
Aconitum carmichaelii (Monkshood)
Delphinium grandiflorum 'Blue Mirror'
Nepeta 'Pink Dreams' pink
Oenothera lamarkiana yellow
Alcea (Hollyhock) 'Camois Rose' rosy-pink
Alcea 'Apple Blossom' pale-pink
Berlandiera 'Chocolate Flower' yellow, fragrant
Campanula (Bellflower) 'Champion Pink'
Campanula latifolia 'Brantwood' purple
Nicotiana 'Fragrant Cloud' and 'Purple Perfume'
Platycodon (Balloon Flower) 'Sentimental Blue'
Lupinus (Lupine), 'Russell Hybrids Mix'
Centaurea cyanus (Bachelor Buttons) common blue variety
 Vegetables & Herbs
 Spinach
 Kale
 Brussels sprouts
 Peas

Broccoli

Thymus serpyllum (Creeping Thyme)

Salvia (common sage)

Oregano

Cilantro

March

Tender Annuals, Vegetables & Herbs

Impatiens wallerana

Cosmos 'Double Pink Bon-Bon'

Zinnia 'Violet Queen'

Marigolds

Lettuce (numerous varieties)

Bok Choy

Beets

Carrots

Basil

Parsley

April

Tomatoes

Transplanting Winter-Sown Seedlings



GOT MILK-JUGS? Filled with annuals and perennials achieved from last January's winter-sowing efforts. It's time to give some of these naturally hardened-off seedlings permanent positions in the open garden. Here are three techniques to use for separating and transplanting the youngsters, along with a tip for releasing them from their milk-jug greenhouse all in one clump:



Taffee Technique (for large growers which were thinly-sown, like Pyrethrum, Lupin, Delphinium, Tomatoes, etc.)

First, release the young plants from their milk-jug greenhouse: cut a flap in the side of the venue, as pictured above. Then tilt the container. Out will come soil and plants, all in one clump.

Next, separate the plants by pulling them apart, as if you were stretching taffee. Pull gently; the goal is to sever roots as little as possible. Should you mangle several roots, don't despair! Winter-sown seedlings are itching to grow, and will recover from the trauma with lightning speed. I'm speaking from experience here.

Now plant the individual seedlings, according to the spacing and light requirements indicated on the seed packet.

Brownie Technique (for thickly-sown seedlings). Tiny plants like Creeping thyme (above), which have been thickly-sown, are best separated in clusters. To do this, remove seedlings and soil as described earlier. Then, with a knife, slice through the soil lengthwise and across, as if you were cutting up a pan of brownies. Plant the clusters as is.



"Hunk-o-Seedlings" Technique. This method of transplanting, which is ideal for large, thickly-sown growers, such as Evening Primrose. Proceed as for the Brownie Technique, but after you've planted them out, pinch off unwanted seedlings as they

grow in order to achieve suitable spacing.

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