

The Easiest Seed Starting: Winter Sowing and Seed Snails
with
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Winter Sowing

Winter Sowing is a way of easily growing cold-tolerant seeds outdoors in semi-enclosed containers. Recommended by the USDA, it was pioneered by Trudi Greissle Davidoff in 2012 in an online essay [How To Winter Sow Seeds Outdoors](#).

Benefits: Compared to indoor sowing, tough, weather-ready seedlings come up when they're ready, need less watering and don't require hardening off. Uses potting soil instead of seed-starting mix and reuses "single-use" materials.

It's best for:

Hardy annuals, half-hardy annuals, and temperate (non-tropical) perennials
Ideal for seeds described as needing "cold stratification." *Can be modified for planting annuals in warmer weather but it's trickier to get the timing right and seedlings will need more regular care.*

Some favorites to try:

Annual Flowers: Calendula, English daisy (Bellis), Nigella, Bread seed Poppies, Feverfew, Scabiosa, Snapdragon, Stock, Sweet Peas, Queen Anne's Lace (Ammi)
West Coast native annuals: California poppies, Showy milkweed (Asclepias speciosa)
Perennials: Lupine, Yarrow (Achillea), Hyssop (Agastache), Echinacea
West Coast native perennials: Bigleaf lupine (Lupinus polyphyllus), Western columbine (Aquilegia formosa), Yaak Yarrow (Achillea m. 'Yaak')
Vegetables: arugula, Bok choy, kale, lettuce, spinach

Timing:

Typically done December – February

Method:

Choose your container: milk jugs, takeout containers, Ziploc bags, or pots within plastic tubs. All require for rain to enter and drain. They should be clear or opaque with room for 3-4" of soil depth.

Milk Jug Method Step-by-Step

- Premoisten potting soil
- Wash jug well, remove cap
- Cut jug in almost in half, leaving a hinge at the handle
- Make drainage holes on bottom and sides with a drill or a heated screwdriver.

- Fill bottom with soil, sow seeds to proper depth
- It's OK to sow closely – it's called the “hunk ‘o seeds” method – when planting take a chunk cutting a cake.
- Insert seed tag
- Close jug with packing or duct tape or zip ties through punched holes
- Write seed name on outside or on tape using waterproof marker or grease pencil.
- Place in partially shaded location
- Check for watering- keep evenly moist, open top in hot weather. Frost and snow are fine.
- Plant when seedlings are 2” high

Online resources – forums to ask questions, share experiences with other gardeners

<https://www.gardenweb.com/discussions/wtrsow>

Facebook also has several winter sowing groups

Storage bins: I sow in individual plastic pots and set them inside a clear plastic storage bin with a lid. The lid and base are all drilled with copious drainage holes. This mimics the milk jugs, but uses my old pots, and lets me grow smaller amounts. Bonus: I can try five kinds of snow peas instead of one milk jug of each variety.

Zip-loc bags: hang horizontally to keep upright, using a dowel or rope and clothespins, place in storage bin.

Seed Snails

‘Seed snails’ are a new, pretty fool-proof space-saving method invented by Farida Sober in the UK that encourages long roots and helps protect seedlings through their most vulnerable early stage of growth. Wrapping the seeds creates a humidity chamber around the seed snail, mimicking greenhouse conditions. Can be done indoors or out, following growing instructions for your seeds. Compared to direct sowing, seedlings are better protected from weather and wildlife.

Benefits:

Saves space, seedlings need less coddling and watering than when grown in 2” cells, they don’t need transplanting, and roots grow deeper.

Timing:

Will depend on whether you are growing indoors or out. Growing outdoors requires more monitoring in warm weather.

Best for:

People wanting to grow more plants in less space, people leery of direct sowing. Works for most seeds given the specific conditions they need (temperature, light).

Seed Snail Sowing Step-by-Step

- **Choose your wrap:** Sober uses polyethylene; others bubble wrap; non-plastic alternatives include burlap, newspaper, wax paper, and hemp or coco coir matting.
- **Premoisten potting mix** (I like to use a tub trug or bucket)
- **Write out your seed tag with waterproof marker or grease pencil**
- **Cut wrap into strips** 5” deep x 17” long; shallow rooting crops like lettuce can be 4”, long-growing crops like leeks should be 7”
- **Spread potting mix** in an even layer nearly to the top, leaving about 4” on the sides open for potential expansion
- **Roll it:** Roll the wrap around the seeds, creating a small cylinder (the "snail"). Turn upright, tape with duct or packing tape.
- **Tamp down soil**
- **Place the Seeds:** follow packet directions for appropriate depth.
- **Place tag,** write on side if desired
- **Stand upright on a tray or in a container**
- **If outside, place in partial shade or protected area**
- **Mist with water and repeat as needed**
- **Transplant** – When seedlings have at least one set of true (adult) leaves, unwrap, divide gently, and plant. If they are getting big but you don’t have time to plant, unwrap, add extra soil, and rewrap until you can.

*I placed mine inside a clear plastic tub (drilled with drainage holes on all sides) for extra protection outdoors.

That’s it! Enjoy these easy seed starting methods!

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<https://ericabrownegrivas.substack.com/>

About me:

I love to explore the interplay of humans and nature in my writing, aiming to help both thrive. You'll see me in publications like the Seattle Times, my columns in the Queen Anne News/Madison Park Times, and national outlets like Better Homes and Gardens and Horticulture Magazine. I studied landscape design at The New York Botanical Garden, worked in nurseries for nine years, and recently became a Tilth Alliance Master Composter/Sustainability Steward. In the horticultural community, I'm a content consultant for *Pacific Horticulture*, a Western director for Garden Communicators International, and on the board of the Northwest Horticulture Society.

Need a speaker for your next garden club meeting or work meetup? Reach out at ebgrivas@gmail.com