

Winter Sowing

What is Winter Sowing? Winter Sowing is starting seeds in mini-greenhouses outdoors to get a jumpstart on growing your garden. It is easy and fun and gives us gardening addicts something to do in January and February. These mini-greenhouses are made from 1 gallon plastic jugs that would normally get recycled or thrown out, so it is a good way to reuse resources. These jugs remain outside in the snow and freezing temperatures until spring so they produce healthy tough plants. It is a good way to stratify seeds that need cold temperatures to germinate, like Echinacea.

What kinds of seeds to plant? Almost all native plants, hardy herbs, perennials, shrubs and other cold-weather crops can be started by winter sowing. Some people grow tomato plants and basil and other annuals in their jugs but I grow mine in a frost-free germination chamber. Warm spells can pop these beautiful little seedlings but one cold night can kill them. I have had very good luck growing native plants. The jugs reproduce the conditions that help them to germinate. Cold crops like kale, chard, collards, broccoli and lettuce also do well in these containers. Once they get their true leaves, they can be transplanted into other pots or into the garden under row covers or plastic tunnels.

How do I prepare the containers? Take common milk jugs or clear 1 gallon water bottles, cut them in half leaving a hinge of plastic so the tops can be lifted and then placed back down and taped after filling with soil and seeds. Make sure there is at least 3-4" of soil depth. Cut drainage holes in the bottom either with a drill or a knife. Remove the caps and recycle them. Use Pro-Mix, garden soil or other potting medium that is weed free and has some vermiculite or sand for drainage. Water the soil and then plant your seeds according to the depth on the packet. Water again and make sure your containers drain well. If they don't drain well, your plants may rot. Put a plant label *inside* the container, written with waterproof ink.

Location and Maintenance? Choose a site with full sun or place the jugs up against a building that faces south and gets at least 6-8 hours of sun per day. Keep protected from animals and keep them in a group so they can be watered easily when needed. Usually rain and snow fall down the top hole and keep them watered but if they get dry, use a funnel to water them. It doesn't matter if snow covers them, they will survive. ☺ When the plants get too big for the jug, open the jugs up and transplant them. Some people like to leave the tops off to give them air and sun and to harden them off. Just make sure you close them on a frosty night and retape them. Jugs can be reused for several years.

This is a fun project to do as a group on a winter day. Each person brings their jugs, then you can form an assembly line to cut and drill, fill with soil, water and plant, label and tape them up. Everyone can share seeds and contribute to buying the potting medium. A bale of Pro-Mix goes a long way in filling jugs. I get mine from Webers in Winchester on Rt. 11, near I-81.