

Growing Native Plants from Seed

Growing native plants from seed is easy and economical. The following is a guide to native plant seed sowing, following the **Germination Code** specific to each species.

Some native seeds **do not** require a *cold moist* period to germinate (**Code A**). Many native seeds **do** need a *cold moist* period to break dormancy and germinate (**Code B**). Some seeds require **light** to germinate (**Code C**), or require **scarification** (a light rub with sandpaper prior to sowing) (**Code D**).

Note: seed companies often use different codes for seed requirements, so check the instructions on each packet.

All native seeds can be planted outdoors in late fall and winter. Here's how:

- 1) **Select a container** – can be recycled salad containers (clamshell style), milk jugs, or plastic nursery pots. All must have drainage holes on the bottom and holes on top for rain/snow. Open containers need screening to protect from critters.
- 2) **Fill with potting medium.** Fill containers with approximately 3" of good quality potting soil. Seed starting mix and fertilizer are not needed.
- 3) **Sow Seeds.** Seeds can be sown thickly. Seeds that require light (**Code C**) should be sown on the soil surface and lightly patted down. Cover these seeds, and those in open pots, with a sprinkle of coarse sand that does not have salt or other additives. This keeps seed from being washed or blown away.
- 4) **Labels!!** Label the container with a waterproof pen. Add another label to the inside. *This is an important step; seedlings without a label will be difficult to identify.*



- 5) **Place outside** in a shady area exposed to winter weather and protected from wildlife.



- 6) **Check for germination** in early spring. Be patient; some seeds will germinate early, others much later. In warmer weather, open closed containers and do not let the seedlings dry out.

7) What do I do with all these seedlings?

When seedlings have grown and developed a root system, they can be divided into small sections (like cutting brownies!) and transplanted into pots. Allow the plants to grow through the summer. They can be planted in the garden in the fall or left in the pots to overwinter. For more detail see:



<https://riwps.org/rwips-blog/winter-sown-native-plant-seeds-sprouting-what-next/>



To learn more about growing native plants, see the "Ecological Gardening" page on the RIWPS website: <https://riwps.org/ecological-gardening/>



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Where can I purchase native seeds? The Northeast Seed Collective distributes seed from plants native to the Northeast Coastal Zone (Ecoregion 59). Purchasing seeds from this collective supports local seed growers. ReSeedingRI, a program of RIWPS, is a member of the Northeast Seed Collective. Seeds grown in various sites in Rhode Island are available online at: www.northeastseedcollective.com.

What kind of soil should I use? Can I use Miracle Grow? A good quality potting soil or a peat/perlite mix such as ProMix is all that is needed. Seeds contain all they need to germinate and do not need fertilizer or special seed starting soil.

When can I sow my native plant seeds? All native plant seeds can be sown in late fall, starting late October/early November, through winter into March. For species that require cold, moist stratification (**Code B**), seed packets will often indicate the number of days required: **B(30)**, **B(60)**.

Can I provide a cold period (stratification) for my seeds in the refrigerator? Yes you can! Seeds can be added to moist, not wet, sand in a plastic bag, labelled with the start and end dates, then stored in the refrigerator. At the end of the required time, very small seeds can be sown with the sand, larger seeds can be removed or sown with the sand. Note: Seeds need both a cold **and** moist environment for stratification. Placing dry seed packets in the refrigerator does **not** provide the moist environment needed.

Where do I put my containers outside in winter? Containers should be placed out of direct sun in an area where they will be exposed to rain and snow, as in the north side of a house. Open pots should be covered with screening to protect from animals.

Do my containers need to be watered during winter? Containers will be subject to rain, snow, sleet and freezing/thawing temperature variations. They normally do not require watering. However, if there is a prolonged period of warmer weather and no precipitation, the containers should not be allowed to dry.

When should I start checking for germination? When the weather warms in spring, some seeds will germinate early, others will take some time. Covered containers should be opened to allow for air circulation and avoid overheating the seedlings. The soil should not be allowed to dry out; the tender, newly germinated seedlings will not survive.

What is that green stuff in my containers? Green algae sometimes forms on the soil surface around seedlings and is caused by excessive moisture. It can be scraped off the surface of the soil without harming the seedlings. The container should be opened for air circulation and the soil should be allowed to become somewhat dry. The seedlings will not be harmed.

How will I know when to transplant my seedlings? Can I leave them in the container? If the seeds have not been sown thickly and there is sufficient soil in the container, they can be left to grow there. If there are many seedlings and not enough soil for root development, seedlings should be divided and planted into pots to continue to grow.

When can I actually plant them in the garden? Plants that have germinated in the spring and allowed to grow through the summer can be ready to go into the ground in the fall. In fact, fall is a great time for planting native plants! They can go in the ground through September and even into October. The roots have time to settle in before winter and they will be ready to go in spring!