

SEED PROPAGATION 101

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PHOTO BY VALERIE REINHARDT

Plant propagation from seed is one of nature's wonders. A small fragile plantlet appears where a seed was placed days before. The seed can do this because it contains all the nutrients necessary for the plant to germinate and grow. All it needs is a little help from light, temperature, moisture and a growing medium.

Garden soil tends to be somewhat heavy, so soil-less mixes are recommended when starting plants from seed. They are easy to find in garden centers and should be porous, lightweight and sterile. Soil-less doesn't mean synthetic; it simply means loam, clay or sand is not used. Most soil-less mixes are mostly sphagnum peat moss. Bark, coir, perlite, or vermiculite may be added. Sphagnum peat is lightweight, inexpensive and, in certain areas, renewable. It drains yet retains water. The pH of around 5.8 generally found in soil-less mixes is fine for most seeds.

Growing containers should be clean and sterile; anything that holds a soil-less mix and allows for good drainage, such as: foam egg cartons, peat pellets and commercial

plastic cell packs. Add water to the mix before placing it in the container and water seeds immediately after planting. Continue to water so that the mix is constantly moist with either bottom watering or a gentle application from above.

Seeds need varying degrees of light for germination. Some actually need darkness. Indirect sunlight or fluorescent lighting is adequate for germination of seeds requiring light. Plant them directly on the surface or mist with water to help the seeds stick to the growing medium. If the seeds need darkness, place a piece of cardboard on the container or place it in a closet or cupboard.

The growing temperature for most seeds should remain in the 60 to 70 degree Fahrenheit range. A warming mat can speed germination but is not necessary. Some seeds need a period of cold (stratification) and some need to be nicked or cut (scarification) for germination to take place. Others may need soaking in water to soften the seed coat. Large seeds should be planted at a depth approximately twice their length while very small seeds can be mixed with fine sand and gently knocked from your hand onto the mix.

There are many reasons to start your plants from seed. Choices for cultivars from seed far exceed the choices of plants at local garden centers and seed propagation remains the least expensive way to obtain plants. When your new seedlings appear strong and healthy, you can add the satisfaction of growing your own plants to the many reasons for growing from seed.