



Winter Sowing Seeds: A Simple Guide

Winter sowing is an ideal method to germinate native plants because it mimics their natural growing processes, while also offering protection from wildlife, conservation of moisture, warmer temperatures, which increases germination rates. It is environmentally friendly, cost effective, and accessible because there is no need for greenhouses, indoor grow lights, or heat mats.

The main idea is to sow seeds into transparent plastic containers with drainage and ventilation holes. A semi-transparent milk jug cut in half and taped back together will do the trick. By placing the jugs outside in winter, the seeds experience cold and wet conditions necessary to break dormancy, and the seeds sprout as the weather warms. The seedlings may then be separated and transplanted directly into the ground in spring, or 'upshifted' into individual pots to continue growing or for community giveaway.

Materials Needed:

Containers: Used semi-transparent or clear plastic one-gallon jugs or similar containers.

Potting Mix: Well-draining and higher-quality mix suitable for seed starting.

Seeds: Choose seeds considered native to your area and requiring cold-wet stratification.

Labels: Waterproof markers and labels to identify the species. Grease pencils work best!

Tape: Duct tape or packing tape for securing container tops and bottoms together.

Tool(s): Scissors, box cutter, or other sharp object to make small holes or slits in containers for drainage.

Steps to Winter Sow Seeds (Steps 1-5 should be completed as one activity, between December-January):

- **1. Prepare Containers:** Clean containers. Cut containers in half, leaving a hinged side for easy closing. Poke or cut drainage holes in the bottom of each container. Remove the cap.
- **2. Fill with Potting Mix:** Add a few inches (~4in) of pre-moistened potting mix to each container.
- **3. Sow Seeds:** Plant seeds according to package instructions. Lightly press seeds into the soil and cover with a thin layer of potting mix (if required). Be careful not to plant them too deep.
- **4. Label and Secure:** Label each container with seed type and date. Close containers and secure with tape. Make sure the cap is *removed* for air circulation.
- **5. Place Outdoors:** Choose a sunny location protected from high winds and interference. If you have multiple, placing them in milk crates keeps them from blowing away.
- **Monitor Moisture:** Water sparingly as needed to keep the soil *consistently moist* but not waterlogged. A heavier jug and condensation on the inside indicates there is adequate moisture.
- **Wait for Spring:** Allow at least 4-6 weeks of cold temperatures for most seed varieties. Seeds will naturally [stratify](#) during winter, and germination will occur when conditions are right.
- **Harden-off seedlings:** In late spring, after the danger of frost has passed and seedlings have grown larger, remove the top half of the jug for a few days. This prepares them for transplanting.
- **Transplant Seedlings:** Carefully tip the jug to remove the entire clump of seedlings, then gently pull individual plants apart by the roots and transplant them into holes (spaced according to packet directions) in your prepared garden site or into individual pots. Water regularly for 1-2 weeks until established.