

# Winter Seed Sowing Basics

By Watertown Community Gardens, for more information, visit: [watertowngardens.org](http://watertowngardens.org)



Milk jugs can be transformed into a mini greenhouse, giving seeds a head start on germination and seedling growth, providing protection from curious critters and strong winds. For native plant seeds that require stratification (experiencing “winter”) to germinate, this method works great. No grow lights or indoor space required, just some basic materials, soil, and seeds. Winter seed sowing can be done in many types of containers, with any potting soil. This is not a precise science, so don't be afraid to make a mistake, just give it a try!

1. Start with an empty, rinsed and clean milk jug or other container.
  - a. The container should be translucent (cloudy) or clear plastic, to let sunlight in.
  - b. Containers smaller than a gallon work, but bigger containers give plants more space to grow before needing to be transplanted.
2. Throw away the cap, or save it for an upcycling project.
3. Create 4-8 holes in the bottom of the jug for water drainage.
  - a. Use a ¼ inch drill bit and a power drill, awl, soldering iron, or cutting blade.
4. Draw a horizontal line around the jug, about 4 inches from the bottom.
  - a. Use scissors to cut along this line, most of the way around the jug, leaving a small section (½ - 2 inches) to act as a hinge near the handle. Box cutters, or other cutting tools also work.
5. Add about 3-4 inches of moistened potting soil and press down lightly.
6. Sprinkle seeds on soil, then sprinkle more soil on top of seeds, and lightly press soil surface.
  - a. For “large” seeds, plant as deep as the seeds are large (¼” deep for ¼” seed).
7. Label the jug with UV-resistant marker or wax pen.
  - a. A regular permanent marker also works, but it will fade after several weeks.
8. Replace the top half of the jug back over the bottom, dry the outer surface of the jug and tape around the entire jug at the seam. This prevents the soil and seeds from drying out too quickly.
9. Place the jug outside, where it will be watered by snow and rain, and receive 4-8 hours of sunlight daily.

Over the next several weeks:

- Check jugs frequently as the weather warms up, lightly water if the soil appears dry.
- In spring, you will notice seeds beginning to sprout.
  - Each species is on a different schedule - milkweed sprouts later than other seeds, so be patient.
- Protect seedlings during heatwaves by moving jugs into a shadier area temporarily or opening the lid.
- When plants have two sets of true leaves, separate the clump into smaller chunks, with 2-5 or so plants in each. These can be transplanted into pots, or planted directly in the ground.
- Keep your baby plants watered: in the jug, and for the first year in their new homes.

