

Sowing and growing instructions

1. Fill a tray with compost and water it well to ensure that it is consistently moist. If you water after sowing, you can wash the seeds about and bunch them together – not what you want.
2. Sow the large seeds individually, spacing about an inch apart on the compost surface, in a grid. Don't push in the seed, as you then won't be able to see each one. If you are distracted, it's all too easy to forget where you've sown and where seeds still need to go. Left on the top, they are clearly visible. When the tray is full, cover lightly with compost.
3. Spaced widely, the seeds can germinate and grow on for a few weeks before you prick them out. This saves you time in the end, rather than simply chucking seed about willy-nilly.
4. Place the tray in a warm and cosy spot to germinate. You don't need light at this stage. I cover seed trays with an empty compost bag – opened out – to keep in warmth and moisture and speed germination. If you do this, after about a week, check trays every morning and night for germination. Once this starts, remove the light-excluding plastic.
5. Hollyhocks take 10-14 days to germinate and then another 3-4 weeks before they're ready for pricking out. If roots are showing at the base of the tray, they're ready to move on.
6. To prick out, handle only the seed leaves, not the stem (which bruises very easily). Get a pencil (or stiff plant label) right under each plant and try to tease out every individual seedling, roots and all.
7. Place each seedling into its own pot of peat-free compost, firm down and water.
8. The ideal spot for growing on has maximum all-round light – ideally, plants should have warm roots but cool tops.
9. Hollyhocks will be ready for planting out in the garden by June, but won't flower well until the following year.
10. You might get the odd plant trying to flower sooner, but snip off the flower spike. This helps the roots to get established before the demands of flowering begin.