

Winter Sowing

A simple seed-starting system: when to choose control vs when to let nature choose timing.

- Start seeds outside during winter using simple clear containers (milk jugs, salad boxes, mini-greenhouse trays).
- Cold keeps seeds dormant; moisture + spring warmth trigger germination when conditions are right.
- This guide is designed to be saved, reused, and followed step-by-step.

The big idea: You are not “behind.” You are choosing a system.

Quick start checklist (5 minutes)

- Pick clear containers with drainage holes (bottom) + ventilation holes (top)
- Pre-moisten seed-starting mix (damp like a wrung sponge)
- Sow seeds at packet depth; label INSIDE + OUTSIDE
- Close container; leave cap off or add top holes for airflow
- Place outside where it can get rain/snow and light (not under an eave)

The System: Control vs Timing

Use this decision guide before you touch a seed packet.

Choose **OUTSIDE** (winter sowing) when you want:

- Strong, weather-adapted seedlings
- Less equipment and less daily maintenance
- No hardening-off stage (they grow adapted)
- Nature to handle the timing

Choose **INSIDE** when you want:

- Speed (earlier harvest or earlier blooms)
- More control over warmth and moisture
- The joy of watching + tending seedlings up close
- A predictable schedule

Truth that keeps you sane: It's normal to do both. The system is choosing intentionally.

Fast decision tree

- 1) Do I need this plant early? → If yes, consider **INSIDE**.
- 2) Can this seed handle cold fluctuations? → If yes, **OUTSIDE** is usually easier.
- 3) Am I willing to wait for outdoor timing? → If yes, **OUTSIDE**.
- 4) Do I enjoy the indoor tending part? → If yes, **INSIDE** (even if it could go outside).

Winter Sowing Step-by-Step

This method uses simple containers to protect seeds while exposing them to natural winter conditions.

1. Pick a container	Clear or translucent containers work best (milk jugs, salad boxes, clamshells).
2. Add drainage + ventilation	Punch holes in the bottom for drainage. Add holes in the top (or leave the cap off) so moisture can enter and air can move.
3. Add mix	Use seed-starting mix. Pre-moisten it so it is damp, not soggy.
4. Sow + cover	Plant at packet depth. Lightly cover and gently press for seed-to-soil contact.
5. Label like you mean it	Label OUTSIDE (permanent marker) and also place a label INSIDE (weather fades ink!).
6. Close + seal	Close the container. If you cut it open to plant, tape it closed. Keep the top vented.
7. Place outside	Put it where it will get precipitation and light. Avoid spots under roof lines that block rain/snow.
8. Wait (this is the point)	Cold keeps seeds dormant. Germination happens when conditions are right, not when you panic.
9. Spring management	When seedlings fill the container, open it more (or remove the top) on mild days to prevent overheating.
10. Transplant	Pot up or transplant when seedlings have true leaves and can handle outdoor conditions (they usually can).

Common mistakes (quick fixes)

- **No drainage** = seeds swim. Add bottom holes.
- **No ventilation** = mold/overheating. Add top holes or leave cap off.
- **Too wet** = rot. Mix should be damp, not dripping.
- **No labels** = mystery seedlings. Label inside + out.

What to Winter Sow (and what to watch for)

Use this as a starting point. Always check your seed packet and adjust for your climate.

Great candidates	Many hardy annual flowers, perennials, cool-season greens, roots, and herbs. Seeds that benefit from natural cold stratification often do especially well.
Sometimes / depends	Some heat-loving crops can be winter sown in protected setups (like a greenhouse) if you are patient and your timing works for your season.
Usually better inside	If you want a very early head start or predictable timing, indoor starting can be simpler for you - especially if your outdoor spring is short.

Troubleshooting

Nothing has sprouted yet	Normal. Winter sowing is timing. Keep containers outside and vented; check moisture occasionally.
Mold on soil	Increase ventilation; remove overly wet material; ensure drainage holes are present.
Seedlings got leggy	They need more light. Move containers to brighter light (still outside).
Seedlings look cooked	On sunny spring days containers can overheat. Open more or remove tops during mild weather.

References (for further reading)

- Cornell Cooperative Extension (Orleans County). "Winter Sowing 101."
- Penn State Extension. "Starting Seeds in Winter."
- Michigan State University Extension. "Winter sowing in containers for Michigan gardeners."
- NC State Extension (Beaufort County Center). "Winter seed sowing in milk jugs: A gardener's guide..."
- University of Maryland Extension. "All the Dirt on Winter Sowing" (slides/PDF).
- Rutgers NJAES Cooperative Extension. "Guide to Winter Seed Sowing" (handout/PDF).
- University of Illinois Extension. "Seed stratification: What seeds require cold treatment."