



February 8, 2022  
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## GREEN UP WINTER by STARTING SEEDS INDOORS

The seed catalogs started arriving in November and I started dreaming of another growing season. And when the cold and gray of winter sets in, I bring some life into my home by starting seeds. Not only is it a satisfying hobby, starting plants from seeds also gives me the opportunity to try new things.

I've been starting plants inside for about 12 years – in fact, my first exposure to the Talbot County Garden Club was a lecture by Lisa Mason Ziegler on seed starting and flower farming!

The supplies needed for seed starting can be done with things as simple as dixie cups and soil in a south facing window! I've tried dixie cups, peat pots, soil blocking, cells trays, and even fashioned little pots out of toilet paper rolls and newspaper. This year, for the first time, I am trying winter sowing.

### Tips From Experience: Seed Selection

- It is important to do a little research before you get started. Some seeds do well inside, while others should be directly sown outside. Some need light and should not be covered with soil, while others need to be covered at a certain depth. And then there are those that need to be soaked in warm water ahead of planting to soften their skins, and others that need to go through a cold period.
- Seed packets provide some information, but for more details, go online. Seed companies like Johnny's provide in-depth information on each type of seed. And there are gardening groups on Facebook that are an invaluable resource for personal experience in similar zones.
- In the end, a lot of seed starting is about trial and error. The good thing is that it doesn't cost much to try to start a packet of seeds, so try away!

### Tips from Experience: Growing Medium

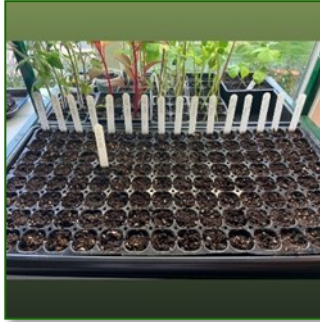
- One key I have found for success with starting seeds inside is to use a soilless seed starting medium. It prevents damping off, a common problem when starting seeds inside, and reduces other problems such as mold and pests.
- Damping off causes the plant to rot where the stem meets the soil. It is usually caused by soil that is too rich. I struggled with that for a couple of years before I learned the value of mixes created specifically for indoor seed starting.

### Seed Starting Methods

- **Jiffy Trays:** This is an easy, ready to go method for starting seeds. Go online, to Walmart, or any number of garden centers, and you can purchase a Jiffy tray for a reasonable price. If you are just trying to start a few vegetables and/or flowers in a small space, these trays are very helpful because they come with a clear dome that keeps in the heat and moisture while also letting in light.
- **Soil blocking:** This technique involves the use of a device that presses soil into blocks, from as small as  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch to four inches. The small blocks allow you to start a large number of plants in a small space, like zinnias, marigolds, and tomatoes. Larger blocks are required for large seeds, like sunflowers and melons. Soil blocking requires a special blend of soil that will hold its

shape. The downside of this method is that the blocks must be watered every day so they do not dry out, and it takes a little practice working the blocker.

- **Peat Pots, Newspaper Pots and Toilet Rolls:** Each of these methods involves a single plant in a pot that can be directly planted into the ground. Newspaper and toilet roll pots give you an opportunity to recycle! Look up techniques online. I had fun with these but learned something the hard way – when planting the pots in the garden, you must completely bury them or they will act as a wick and suck the moisture away from the plant.



Seeds in a recycled cell tray.

- **Seed and Plug Trays:** I start a lot of seeds each spring and now start most of them in cell trays that I've either purchased or recycled from garden centers and friends. The cells allow plenty of room for the seedlings to develop bigger roots systems and make watering easy.



Seeds winter sown in milk jugs.

- **Winter Sowing:** Most people use old plastic milk jugs for this process, which is good for seeds that need a cold period like milkweed, broccoli, and foxglove. And there is a winter sowing group on Facebook that is immensely helpful.



A portable indoor greenhouse with lights.

- **Ready to Plant Out:** No matter what indoor method you use, your tender seedlings need to be hardened off before planting out. That involves setting them out in a protected place for an increasing number of hours over a few days to acclimate them to the great outdoors. Once again, all this info is available online.

#### • **Getting Serious**

While an east or south facing window will do, serious seed starters use lights to ensure their seedlings grow straight and have the necessary hours of light to flourish. Shop lights, which are cheap, or those designed to provide the necessary spectrum, will work.

- Many seeds need moisture and warmth to germinate. Something as simple as plastic wrap will do to keep the seeds moist and cozy. The Jiffy trays come with a clear dome. Some of us have small indoor green houses that work wonderfully!
- My research informed me that a small fan will help keep gnats at bay and help strengthen the stems, so I have added that to my operation.
- It is not necessarily critical where you buy your seeds, it's a matter of preference and budget. I recommend seeds that are not treated with chemicals, such as Neonicotinoids, which are bad for bees. Read the seed packet and if in doubt purchase organic seeds.

**One final thought:** If you've planted different seeds, LABEL THEM! Don't rely on memory.

As I mentioned earlier, starting your own seeds gives you the opportunity to try different things. There are scores of different tomatoes, lots of unique zinnias, pollenless sunflowers, and colorful squash and beans just waiting for you to try.

***In the end, it's all about fun!  
And it's nice to have "babies" to tend to when the doldrums of winter set in.***