

Madame Beespeaker's Seed Starting Tips

I save money by recycling pots and containers as trays, so every year I engage in a ritual of scrubbing a few pots at a time with ecologically friendly soap, slowing down my life to treat them with the love they deserve. Once the pots are clean and dry and I've consulted the charts, stars and my heart's desires to decide what to grow, I get ready to plant. The trickiest part of the whole process is judging the timing of the seedlings as they emerge to make sure you have the space and the time to pot up and plant out everything you start. If you do get overwhelmed with tiny veggie starts and an abundance of onions, remember that sometimes it's best to give them away.

Seed Starting Rhyme: *One for the mouse, one for the crow, one to rot and one to grow.*

Why start seeds indoors?

Giving plants a head start before the soil outside warms up. Esp. important if they have a long time from germination to flowering or fruiting.

Being able to keep an eye on the moisture of the soil and pamper them as baby plants. Taking the plants that have successfully germinated and put them where you want them to be. Letting them grow to a stage where they can compete with weeds and outdoor pests such as slugs.

What seeds not to start indoors:

Think about root veggies or plants with long tap-roots. They generally do not like being uprooted. Some can be started indoors and planted when they are small. Also wildflowers that benefit from tough love, and natural care. They don't like to be coddled. They are best sown in fall, and the second best time is early spring.

Why germinate some seeds in a plastic bag with a damp paper towel?

So you can germinate many seeds in one space. So you can see which seeds are viable. Easy to transplant once the radical has formed. Not so much for the tiny seeds. Those you want to sow into pots first. This method can also be used to test the viability of old seeds.

How do I know when to start seeds indoors or sow direct outdoors?

Seek charts for your climate (ie West Coast Seeds), experience and ask/watch an experienced gardener. Once you get to the month of May, it's time to start sowing seeds outdoors. Victoria Day is like Christmas for gardeners because you get to put everything outside, even the plants from warmer climes.

Step 1: Consult growing guides for your area (<https://www.westcoastseeds.com/pages/regional-planting-charts>) and organize your seeds chronologically according to which month you'll need to plant them. Research germination tips for seeds you have never grown before. You can use a photograph album with plastic pockets the right size for the seed packets to help keep your seeds in order.

Step 2: Gather all the materials you'll need for growing plants from seed. (See the list below).

Step 3: Wash your pots. The pots that you buy your plants in can be used for several years if you simply wash and scrub them before every use. You can use cleaning vinegar and water instead, or one part environmentally friendly bleach in nine parts water.

There are a few low-cost alternatives to plastic pots. Green peas and sweet peas can be started in paper egg cartons and then planted out by tearing off each compartment and planting it right into the garden. Plastic yogurt containers can be used provided you make holes in the bottom for drainage. Milk cartons can be used for fast-growing seeds such as peas and beans, but they tend to rot with long-term use.

Step 4: Choose the place to grow your seeds. Seeds that don't need light to germinate can be started on top of the refrigerator where the heat coming from the bottom helps the seeds germinate without drying the top layer of soil. Plants that require light can be started on a sunny windowsill or under grow lights. Make sure you have trays to catch the drips from your pots.

Step 5: Prepare any seeds that need extra care for germination, such as soaking, scoring, or stratifying.

Step 6: Label the pots with the name of the plant and the date. Labelling before planting makes the process less messy. When you try new plants, especially tricky ones, I recommend labelling it with the date you planted and the date you expect the seeds to germinate. After many years, I have found that labelling with a grease pencil is the best because everything else gets wet and disappears or fades away. So make sure you have a couple of grease pencils and masking tape where you will not lose them. If the pots are made of light-coloured plastic you can mark them right on the pot. I re-use plastic plant markers because wooden ones usually disintegrate over time. You can make them by cutting strips out of plastic yoghurt containers.

I also recommend starting a planting diary. Document, document, document! Take Photos, make notes. Whatever motivates you to keep track of what you're planting. This is especially important if you are working with any toxic plants.

Step 7: You are ready to plant! Fill the pots with soil and water them after you plant the seeds with warm water to aid germination. When watering seeds choose a container you can handle and control easily without spilling or overpouring. I use all sorts of little jugs, wine bottles, water bottles. Check the depth recommended for each seed. (A general rule is to plant a seed the depth of twice its size.) Really tiny seeds don't need to be covered at all. Bean seeds need to hear the church bells ringing.

Make sure you have scissors to open tricky seed packets and tape to tape them up to prevent extra seeds from escaping.

Step 8: Cover the seeds with plastic wrap or a clear plastic bag (which you can use over and over again if it is cleaned). The word "cloche" is loosely used to describe any kind of glass or plastic cover a gardener puts over one plant or a small group of plants in the early stages of its growth. Sometimes you can buy seedling flats with plastic covers that come in handy because it slows down the evaporation of water during that crucial time when tender seedlings need to stay evenly moist.

Some gardeners like to water seedling flats from below so that the soil wicks up the moisture and the roots grow down to reach it. It's also important to water or mist the surface when the seeds are very close to the top. My neighbour Catherine Shapiro taught me to use plastic wrap or washed plastic bags to keep the surface of the pots moist before they germinate. They just need to be loosely placed on top so the seedlings won't be suppressed when they emerge the seeds have germinated they must be moved onto a sunny window or under grow lights. Make sure they are not in a place with so much sun that they will be "cooked".

Step 9: Put a fan in the seedling room to prevent damping off, or open a window for air circulation. Pet your seedlings so that they become stronger. Turn your seedlings, so the stems dance toward the sun and become stronger on all sides. Water the plants occasionally with room temperature chamomile tea to prevent damping off (rotting) of seedlings. Putting vermiculite on the surface also helps.

Step 10: Once your plants have the first set of true leaves you can put them in a bigger pot or in some cases, get them ready to transplant them outside

Step 11: Harden off your seedlings by placing them in a sheltered location that's not too hot for a few hours every day. Start with 3-4 hours, then increase by one to two hours every day for a week., taking the plants inside at night. Then carefully transplant the seedlings into the garden. When I put my peas outside I like to put them in cloches or netting to protect them from the birds. Other tender seedlings

may need to be protected from slugs by cutting up a copper pot scrubber and anchoring it around the seedlings with twigs. Make sure you place a label in the soil next to your plants.

Potting-table Essentials

For labelling: Keep these in your grab and go planting kit

2 grease pencils

Masking tape and Ziploc bags for opened seed packs (esp if planting outside)

Gaffer's tape (duct tape)—I use for labelling black pots

Plant labels—I use/reuse plastic because wooden ones break down too fast!

For cleaning pots:

Environmentally safe soap, clove oil, enviro-bleach, cleaning vinegar

Small scrub brushes

For Watering:

Jug or wine bottle

Spray bottle

Large jar of chamomile tea

Bottle of liquid seaweed tea to dilute for watering seedlings.

Pest Control:

One or two carnivorous plants to eat pests such as whiteflies

Soil and amendments:

Organic potting soil

Manure tea

Compost, Sea Soil, etc. (Absolutely avoid peat)

For germination tests:

Paper towel and ziplock baggies

Infrastructure:

Fluorescent grow lights

Mini greenhouse racks

Fan for air circulation

Rags for wiping your hands in between planting and labelling

Fine organic potting soil for small seeds

Regular organic potting soil for potting up medium to large seeds.