Sow in Sorrow Reap in Joy – The Mystery of Winter Sowing

Katrina Boguski, Lanark County Master Gardeners

Winter can be one of the hardest times for gardeners. Spring brings with it the joy of a garden's re-birth; summer sets fields aglow with sunlight and colour, and fall ushers in the bounty of the gar-den's harvest, but winter on the surface seems to offer nothing to the garden or the gardener. Never-theless, every year, the garden and the gardener must endure the winter season. Instead of regretting this time, gardeners can turn winter into an opportunity to get a head start on the year and to con-template the mysteries of gardening that remain unexplained. One of these mysteries is how, in na-ture, a tiny seed exposed to the winter can develop into a full-grown plant according to some rhythm which it senses. The seeds that nature sows grow heartier and freer than any of the ones we grow inside ourselves or purchase from a nursery's hothouse. Winter sowing allows gardeners the oppor-tunity to plant seeds outside and to watch them grow according to nature's rhythm, even if we can-not explain or even sense that rhythm ourselves.



To sow seeds in winter, use either plastic containers, such as water jugs, or plastic bags. You can al-so use seed trays covered with plastic domes purchased for this purpose or made from clear plastic packages, such as those containing salad mixes sold in many produce departments. With any of these materials, you are effectively creating a small greenhouse in which the seedlings can get a head start. The seeds will be exposed to nature's rhythm and will emerge as strong and healthy as any other plants that spring up in your garden on their own without your intervention.

Cut drainage holes in the bottoms of the containers to allow excess water to run off. Failure to com-plete this step can lead to freezing or fungus growth. An electric drill can make light work of this step; just be sure to follow proper safety protocols. Some plastic containers have very smooth surfaces, which may cause the drill bit to slip off, and others may bend when under pressure. If the plastic is soft enough, you can make holes by using scissors or a sharp knife. There also needs to be an open-ing at the top of the container so that precipitation can get in to water the seeds. If using a water jug, leave the lid off.

Jugs can be cut in half and then taped back together to keep the top and bottom together. Before tap-ing, fill the containers partway with potting soil and plant seeds at a depth that is appropriate for them. Cover with the top portion with the lid. It is best to use seeds that

will mature in 90 days or less, and ones from plants that can be easily transported. There is no need to harden off seeds grown by this method.

Place the containers in an area where they can get some sun but are sheltered a bit from harsh winds, then wait. You will not know exactly how long you will have to wait, but at about the same time the rest of your garden starts waking up from its winter slumber, the seeds you sowed in the dead of winter will start to emerge. At this point, you will need to watch them a little more closely, but nowhere near as attentively as you would seeds sown indoors under grow lights. The seedlings may need a little extra water if there hasn't been much rain or snow, or they may need the tops of the containers opened periodically to let excess heat escape, but, for the most part, they will be inde-pendent of your care.

The experience of seeing the seedlings emerge may provide both great joy and great disappointment as you realize how little you had to do with the simple task of winter sowing. All you needed to do was put some seeds and soil in containers and leave them outside exposed to nature's timing.

There are many excellent videos online that go into more detail about each step, but really, the pro-cess is as simple as it sounds. The hard part is believing it works. Those who take the risk and try it will be blessed with a head start on the spring. Gardeners will also be left with a sense of wonder as to how it all happened without much help from them.

As the saying goes, "those who sow in sorrow, shall reap in joy." If you are sad because it is winter, or for any other reason, do some winter sowing. You can water the seeds with your tears, and in spring, you can stand in awe at how everything worked out. You will not be able to understand how it all happened, but you will be glad that it did.

There are different methods of winter sowing.

The Ottawa Wildflower Seed Library has an excellent video series on their website on how to winter sow:

https://wildflowerseedlibrary.ca/instructions/how-to-winter-sow-2/

Membership 2026

We will be renewing the 2026 Memberships at our December meeting. The price for Annual membership is $15.00 per person. In order to keep our records up-to-date, we ask that you complete a 2026 Membership form if your information has changed. Beat the spring rush and renew early! New memberships are always welcome.

This newsletter is published by the Carleton Place and District Horticultural Society and is distributed to its members free of charge.

We depend on our members for its content. If you would like to contribute, please send your submissions to: cphorticulture@gmail.com

Editor: Design and Layout: Linda Bartlett

Contributors: Rick Roberts, Irene Tobis, Brenda Cupper, Barbara Fowler and Katrina Boguski, Lanark County Master Gardeners.

Photos: Rick Roberts, Brenda Cupper, Donna Allen, Bri Logan, Rob Drapeau, Irene Tobis, Emma Murphy Peterborough Master Gardener

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