

Winter Sowing – How To

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Kathy Bark

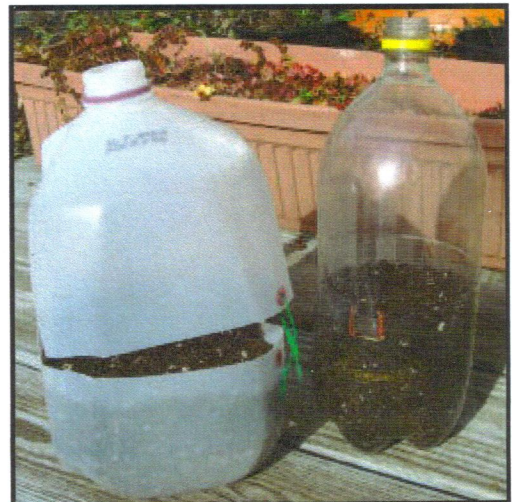


The cold temperatures keep most of us cooped up for the winter, and this simulated hibernation begins to take its toll on us mentally. Too bad we can't simply sleep through it! So, as promised, I am providing a few ideas to satisfy the gardening bug when it inevitably bites. My last entry gave instructions for creating a beautiful terrarium, very suitable for gifts. Quite possibly you could find a way to turn the following project into a gift, as well!

What is winter sowing? It is the centuries old practice of germinating seeds outdoors during late fall and winter months, generally within a protected container of some type. Sometimes farmer's fields are even planted in the winter to allow the crop plants to germinate in their own time, when conditions become favorable. If you have ever grown plants from seed indoors and have found it somewhat tedious and time consuming, you have to try this method!

Just about any outdoor plant can be winter sown, including annuals, but some will be much more rewarding than others.

So...why not just toss the seed onto the bare soil in the fall? Wind, birds, insects and rain can all easily disturb or eat the seed which will either be destroyed or carried to an undesirable location. In addition, many wildflowers do not like to be transplanted, so shifting them to another location is risky and at best will set back their growth progress. Winter sowing is actually fun (get the kids involved, they will love it!) and very rewarding in the spring when you see your first sprouts emerge inside their snow



covered containers. **Let's get started!**

What you will need: Here is a basic list of supplies (your imagination may expand this list somewhat) and yes, **Suburban has everything!**



- **Seeds** – **Suburban Lawn & Garden** stocks many different varieties of seeds, come and pick our your favorites!
- **Soil** – I prefer to use **Fertilome Ultimate Potting Mix** which comes in a 25 or 50 quart size. This soil is the perfect consistency for seed starting and has very few sticks or bark pieces.
- **Containers** – I will elaborate on the wide range of possibilities, but a general “rule of thumb” is that it should hold about 4 inches of soil and translucent enough to view your thumb through it. **Suburban Lawn & Garden carries 4 inch plastic reusable pots** (ideal for this project) which are either used inside a larger covered container or bagged.
- **Spray bottle** (optional)
- **Paint pens** to label your pots or containers. Sharpie marker seems like an excellent choice until you go out one day to find all of your labels clean as a whistle. You can get a paint pen at almost any craft store.

Container choices will vary greatly as there are many scenarios to choose from. Your needs and availability of space in your yard or patio will play a role in what you choose to use. Some of the recycled options may be more unsightly than others, so keep your neighbors in mind when deciding what to use and where to place them in your yard.



- **Recycled containers** such as **milk jugs or soda bottles** (toss the lids, cut them in half to sow your seeds, then duct tape them together for their time outdoors)
- **4 inch plastic pots** nestled within an **under the bed storage bin** or other large translucent

container. Holes will need to be drilled in the lid and base to allow excess moisture to escape.

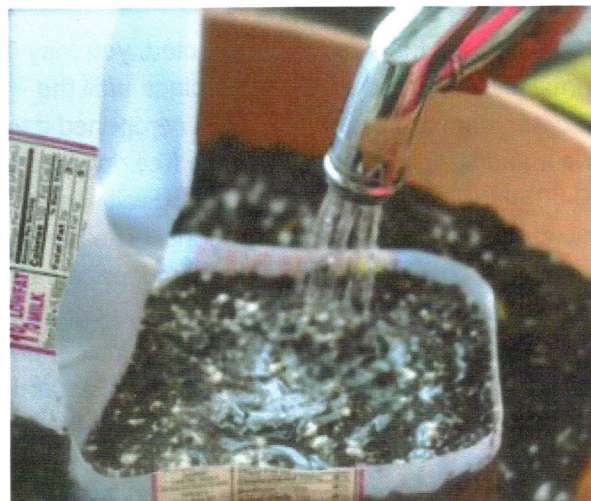
- **4 inch plastic pots** in a **crate** which is **placed inside a clear plastic bag** with ventilation holes.
- **Zip lock baggies** also work well, but will need to be handled carefully. The very tips of the bottom corners are cut to allow drainage and one corner of the bag is left unzipped to allow for ventilation. The main drawback for this container is that they are not easy to water when needed.



Do not use fiber pots or pellets to winter sow with. The fiber will wick the moisture out of your soil and the pellet would need to be watered almost daily. Both are completely unreliable. There are many other items you can use as containers, if you have an idea, try it! You would be surprised at the options. Now that we have everything gathered together, it is time to get started!

The first thing you will want to do is insure everything has ventilation and drainage. Less is best as far as the ventilation goes, you can always add more if necessary. I will cover this in more detail a bit later.

Next you will need to fill your pots with 4-5 inches of soil lightly tamping it down, but don't pack it. Now you will want to wet your soil with hot water. **Do not use cold water** because the soil is far less receptive to it and you will undoubtedly retain dry spots. The weight of the pot will be a good indicator of the moisture content. I slowly flood mine (faucet on a small steam) to insure every bit of soil is reached. Once the pot is drained it is ready for the seeds. For this part, I usually use a few layers of towels to place under the pots, but you can use plastic or other material to protect your furniture or floor.



Sowing your seeds is very easy. Note the suggested seed depth within the instructions of your seed packet. Usually, the smaller the seed, the less soil will be covering them. But this is not always the case. Sow accordingly and dust with a bit of fresh soil to even out the disturbances. Mist the surface with water and you are done!

Assemble your containers into their bins or holding areas, insure all of them have proper drainage and ventilation, park them outdoors and then go back inside to your warm and cozy house. Don't worry if they become buried in the snow, they will be just fine!



For the initial week or so you will want to monitor for **proper humidity** inside the containers. Select a “warm” day above freezing to inspect your handiwork. If there are large droplets of water on the inside of the container, you may want to add a few more holes for ventilation. Ideally you want to see a haze of moisture, but not a rain forest.

The only other thing you will be checking on is **moisture**. If we are below freezing, there will be no need to do anything. As the temperatures begin to fluctuate, moisture will be lost and you may have to gently water your little dependents from time to time. Be careful not to disturb the soil as you water. Be aware that frozen soil will look dry, so let the weight of the pot help you decide if they need a drink.

Depending on the seeds you selected, you may find **seedlings as early as February**. The lids of your containers will need to remain in place until the weather warms up a bit, but could be opened if the sun is out and temperatures are above freezing (around 40-50° F). The first set of leaves you will see are called the seed leaves or cotyledons. The next set of leaves are considered true leaves and, once those appear, you can begin to transplant into your garden or large pots. I prefer to let mine grow on inside their pots until they have a few sets of true leaves and a larger root system.





Stop by one of our [three locations](#) and pick up a few seed packets, pots and soil and you are ready to sow! Winter sown plants are hardier and have a much more extensive root system than those started indoors. Unless you don't give them enough fresh air on nice warm days, they will not experience the dreaded damp off, nor will they become leggy. This really is the easiest way to insure a bumper crop of your favorite flowers. Have fun and don't forget to get the kids involved!!

Feel free to email me if you have questions, I will be happy to help!

THE GARDEN THAT IS FINISHED IS DEAD