

# Wintersowing

*So what is Wintersowing, you say? Wintersowing is a method of sowing perennial or hardy annual seeds during the winter. It's as simple as that. What makes it special is that you sow the seeds in recycled containers that have clear lids to imitate a greenhouse. The seeds are protected from Mother Nature and critters because of the lid and the soil warms up sooner and the seeds sprout sooner due to the clear lids that are attached to the container. I generally sow my seeds in January because that is the time when I am ready for Spring to arrive and when I have the most free time. But you can sow them as late as March or even April. You can sow them earlier, but it's best to wait until temperatures are consistently in the 30s. You don't want any seeds to prematurely start to sprout. Another perk is that this method costs pennies compared to buying grown plants in the nursery. There is absolutely no fancy equipment to buy and no bulky light set-up to maintain in your home.*

*Please keep in mind that my method of wintersowing works best for zone 5 and with little modification can be done in zones colder than 5 as well as zones 6 or 7. Wintersowing techniques vary greatly in zones warmer than 7, so I can't comment on what techniques will work well for you. I imagine someone in a warmer zone, would not need to use lids on their containers. I learned how to winter sow my seeds from [www.wintersown.org](http://www.wintersown.org). I'm sure they can offer some additional information for these warmer zones.*

*Many people who do not have success starting plants from seeds indoors, have success with this wintersowing method. I was one of those people. You don't usually have the problems with low light or damping off that you might have indoors and the practice of hardening off the plants before putting them outside is virtually not necessary since the plants have been grown outside from the start.*

## General Instructions

1. First you need to save some containers. I prefer to use take-out containers from restaurants because, generally they have plastic or tin bottoms and clear plastic tops. I also really like using the plastic containers that some fruits and vegetables come in at the grocery store. Generally, they already have holes in the bottom and top so you won't have to drill too many more and they are clear plastic. Some people use milk jugs and juice bottles, but I find them too cumbersome to work with since you have to cut the bottle/jug in half and then tape it back together once the seeds are sown. Do what works well for you.
2. Once you have all your containers saved, make sure they are cleaned well with soap and water and sterilized in a 1 part bleach, 10 part water solution.
3. Once clean, you will need to poke drainage holes in the bottom of the container and air holes in the top. I like to use an awl to make the holes, but any sharp object will do. Be careful not to poke your finger. If you are using produce containers that already have holes in the bottom and top, you still may need to poke 2-3 holes in the middle of the lid to allow more rain water to get through.
4. Once the containers are prepared, get yourself some sterile seed starting mix and wet it down thoroughly with warm water. I like to use warm water because it absorbs faster into the peat moss based seed starting mixes that I like to use. Once wet, fill each container and pack the soil in tightly as it will settle quite a bit over the winter months. If you are using a produce container, you may need to put a sheet of newspaper on the bottom or a coffee filter as the holes can be quite large. The paper will help prevent soil from coming out and it will also breakdown and enrich the soil over time.
5. Now you are ready to sow your seeds. Generally, I just sprinkle them on the top of the seed starting mix then press them lightly into the soil, but if you happen to know the manufacturer's suggested seed sowing depth, use that. A good site to get information on seeds and seed starting is [The Seed Site](http://TheSeedSite.com). Another good site can be found [here](#).
6. Now place the clear covers on the containers. Most take-out containers snap on or can be crimped around the edges to secure them. If you decided to use bottles, then tape the bottle back together using duct tape. This is the best tape to use, as it will hold up in cold wet conditions.

7. Label each container in two places. I generally put a piece of tape on the bottom and then write on the tape with a permanent marker, then I mark the lid as well. If the ink fades from the sun on the lid, at least the tape on the bottom should still be good. In the case of the larger produce containers, I usually write on a plastic marker and slide the marker inside the side of the container.
8. Place the containers in a partially shaded area. I put mine on a picnic table. If you have pets that roam the yard, you may want to put them in an area they cannot get in.
9. Now all you have to do is wait until Spring. Once the seeds start sprouting (between April-June depending on variety and your weather), check them every couple of days to make sure the soil is moist and that they are not growing too high for the container. As it warms up, you will need to make the air holes in the top bigger to allow more heat to escape and to allow more water to enter. I even remove the lids completely on warm days, and then cover them back up for evening. As temperatures warm up, you may have to water them daily.
10. Once the seedlings have gotten their first set of true leaves, you can transplant them to their own pots to continue developing their roots. This is where all those nursery pots you've been saving come in handy. I especially like the 4" diameter pots. After a couple of weeks, I will also give them a shot of organic fertilizer, at half strength.
11. Depending on varieties, most can be planted in the garden mid-late summer on into the fall.

If you'd like a list of seeds suitable for wintersowing, go directly to the [Wintersown.org](http://Wintersown.org) site.

#### Here's a list of what I've sown so far for 2006.

- Burgundy Gaillardia
- Snowdrift Daisy
- False Mallow
- 'White Swan' Echinacea
- 'Orange Meadowbrite' Echinacea
- Wild Lupines
- Siberian Wallflower
- Winky Rose Columbine
- Prairie Sun Rudbeckia
- McKanna's Columbine
- Purple/White Columbine

**January 2, 2006** - There are 17 containers. Some containers are divided into two and three sections so I was able to put more than one type of seed per container.

**January 4, 2006** - You can let the snow pile on the containers with no problems. I even pile more snow on them in case we have an early warm spell, which is going to be the case next week. You don't want them to sprout too early. Three or more days of temperatures in the 60s could trigger them to sprout if they are in a full sun location. This is why I have them in a partially shaded area now. I can always move them to more sun later in the spring.

**January 21, 2006** - We have had an incredibly mild month with 50 degree temperatures on several days. There is almost no snow left in the yard, just some very small banks at the end of the driveway. I was concerned that the seeds may have sprouted early since some of the bulbs and perennials are showing signs of growth, but they have not. So, I decided to sow some more seeds.



Additional seeds sown on **1/21/06**:

- Snapdragons - Tetra Mixed Colors
- Verbascum-Southern Charm Mix
- Hollyhock-Country Romance Mix
- Clasping Coneflower
- Mexican Hat
- Blue Salvia

**February 23, 2006** - Nothing really new to report other than that I lost one of my containers due to a wind storm we had on 2/17. Wind gusts were reported as high as 84 mph in some parts of our county and even higher in other parts of the state. I should have moved them inside, especially since there was no snow to hold them down, but I didn't. Only the one container fell to the ground (Orange Meadowbrite Coneflowers) so that was lucky. Maybe I'll find some sprouts in the grass come Springtime, you never know. I still have seeds left, so I may do up another container. If not, I'll start them indoors with my annuals in March.

**March 28, 2006** - Nothing new to report, just wanted to check in so this stays active. Nothing has sprouted yet, but I checked the containers yesterday and they all seem fine. They are not too wet or too dry. I will be moving them to a sunnier location later this week since it seems our cold weather is nearly over.

**April 2, 2006** - I moved my containers to a full sun location and discovered that I had sprouts! About a 1/4 of the wild lupine has sprouted along with several Dame's Rocket, Siberian Wallflowers and Prairie Sun Rudbeckia. I am so excited. Spring just might be here to stay.

**April 10, 2006** - I discovered more sprouts yesterday! I now have snapdragons, mexican hats, purple coneflowers, and snowdrift daisies. Now that the days are constantly in the 60's, I expect more will sprout very soon. Nights have still been rather chilly though.

**April 15, 2006** - False mallow has also started to sprout. Here is a picture of the lupine. They are going crazy and starting to get their secondary leaves.

**May 26, 2006** - I am happy to report that I have started the transplant process for many of the seedlings. I know that I could avoid this process by using deeper containers, but I prefer to separate them and transplant them when they are still very small.



I am also happy to say that many of the columbines and other seeds that had not sprouted are beginning to sprout now, so that is very exciting for me. It not only shows that some of the seeds I saved myself for the first time last year were indeed viable, and that seeds that were several years old were also still good.

**July 6, 2006** - About 3/4 of the seedlings have been either planted in the ground or will be planted within the next week or so. I would have to say that this year was again a success, even though many of the seeds sprouted later than expected. If I am going to wintersow as many seeds next year, I am going to rethink the containers I am going to use. I was thinking of using some small nursery pots (which I have many) and then covering them with some sort of plexiglass or plastic to help protect them from the elements (critters mainly), so they have a chance to make it through the winter. Then I won't have to do so much transplanting. That was very time consuming. I know many people who use milk jugs and juice bottles, but I don't really have a good place to store them until time for use, so I am definitely leaning towards reusing nursery pots instead.

Following is a list of things that did not sprout at all. These were old seeds and seeds given to me by friends, so who knows why they didn't sprout.

- Burgundy Gaillardia (seed probably was not saved correctly)
- Liatris Blazing Star (unknown why it didn't sprout)
- Verbascum (very old seeds)

- Blue Salvia (seed probably not saved correctly)
  - Blackberry Lily (Difficult to germinate anyway)
  - Marigold Mix (seed probably saved incorrectly)
- 6/32 did not sprout...not bad in my opinion.



Rudbeckia 'Prairie Sun'



Cardinal Flower



Snapdragons

[www.gardensandcrafts.com](http://www.gardensandcrafts.com)

# Wintersowing Diary – 2007

I decided to change the way I wintersowed. To start, I purchased some 4" pots and the appropriate trays to hold those pots. The pots as well as the trays have drainage holes. Gary made a simple box with a plexi-glass top to cover the trays. I drilled holes in the plexi-glass so that there are two holes per container. I may have to add more holes later, but I wanted to see how this would work first. The holes are primarily to allow water into the pots in the spring.

Holes are also good to let heat escape when temperatures start to rise in the spring. I will monitor the heat when the time comes.



This year I wintersowed the following: Double Decker Coneflowers, Razzamatazz Coneflowers, Purple & White Columbine, Tennessee Coneflowers, Green Wizard Rudbeckias, White/Pink Foxgloves, Chocolate Soldier Columbine, Red Midget Mexican hats, False Sunflower, Claspig Coneflowers, Black Barlow Columbine, Velour Bronze Violas, Bowles Black Violas, Penny Orchid Violas, Penny Lane Mix Violas, Rococo Mix Pansies, Dream Formula Mix Pansies.

*Update - Though this method worked well, I think the individual containers above worked even better.*

