

Winter Sowing: Gardening in Ohio's Winter

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January in Ohio may seem like an unlikely time for gardening, but for the novice and the seasoned gardener, January marks the beginning of a unique planting opportunity using a method known as winter sowing.

Winter sowing is a method that capitalizes on the natural cycles of the seasons. As the temperatures drop, gardeners can take advantage of the cold by sowing seeds in miniature greenhouses made from recycled containers. These simple yet effective structures provide the perfect environment to allow the seeds to germinate and thrive despite the wintry conditions.

The process starts with collecting containers like milk jugs, plastic bottles, or clear tubs. The containers need to be clear to allow sunlight in. The container needs to be able to hold three to four inches of a potting mix and it should allow sufficient room for the seedlings to grow. With a few cuts and holes for drainage and ventilation, these makeshift greenhouses are ready to house an array of seeds. One can plant a variety of cold-hardy vegetables, flowers, and herbs using this method. When selecting plant seeds to winter sow, look for keywords on seed packets such as cold hardy, can withstand light frosts, self-sows, sow in fall, or requires stratification. These are ideal candidates for winter sowing.

Fill the containers with three to four inches of potting mix. It is not recommended to use a seed starting mixture as it does not retain moisture as well as potting mixtures. The moisture content of the potting mixture should be moist enough to clump together in your hand, yet easily breaks apart with light pressure. Follow the planting instructions on the seed packets. Mark your containers as an aid to help you remember what you planted. Leave the containers outside with openings to allow moisture in. As an example, with a milk jug container, leave the cap off and punch drainage holes into the bottom of the container. Place the container outside in a sunny location and let nature do the rest. The Penn State Extension offers an excellent article on the process at <http://extension.psu.edu/starting-seeds-in-winter>.

The beauty of winter sowing lies in its simplicity. You do not need any special skills making this method ideal for beginner gardeners. You do not need special grow lights, temperature, and humidity devices. The process is inexpensive and does not require a lot of care or lots of room. Seeds are placed in moist soil within the containers, covered lightly, and then left outdoors to endure the frost and snow. The fluctuations in temperature and natural light cues mimic the conditions the seeds would experience in nature, prompting them to sprout when the time is right. Additional benefits you do not need to harden off or climatize your seedlings. Nature has already done this for you.

While the garden lies dormant under a blanket of snow, these mini greenhouses work their magic. Gardeners should check their containers periodically, ensuring the soil remains moist but not waterlogged. If moisture is needed, simply use a spray bottle and heavily mist the top surface. As the days lengthen and the sun gains strength, the first signs of life emerge from the containers, signaling the promise of a bountiful growing season ahead.

For Ohioans passionate about gardening, January isn't a time of idleness but rather the beginning of a journey toward a flourishing garden. Give winter sowing a try and let's get growing starting this winter.