

Winter sowing native plants step by step

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Native plant seeds sown using pots/bins (above) and jugs (right).

Preparing to sow

- In fall, **obtain seed** from your yard, local gardeners, the bush, or suppliers such as Northern Wildflowers. Clean North's guide on collecting seed (including tips for ethical collecting in the wild): cleannorth.org/2022/09/16/want-to-collect-native-plant-seed-for-sowing-this-fall-winter-weve-got-the-scoop/.
- **Collect containers:** Windshield washer jugs (rinse well), vinegar jugs, 2L pop bottles, yogurt containers and margarine tubs, plant pots, etc. Toss all caps and lids.
- **Prepare containers: All need holes on top (for snow/rain to get in) and bottom (for drainage).**
 - **Jugs:** Remove/toss caps. Cut around the jug at about 4" from the bottom, leaving 2–3" uncut across the back side to create a hinged dome. Punch or drill several holes around the top of the jug and across the bottom.
 - **Yogurt/margarine tubs:** Toss lids. Punch or drill drain holes all around the bottom of each.
 - **Plant pots:** Make sure they have drain holes.

Sowing

- **Fill** bottom half of each jug or most of each pot with potting mix. Pat down soil gently.
- **Spread seeds** over the soil. More seeds per pot increases the chance that at least some seeds will sprout in each container—but spreading fewer seeds in more pots can give you more total plants.
- **Cover seeds** with a thin layer of soil; pat soil gently.
- **Label** each jug or pot with a weatherproof garden marker or paint pen. On jugs, write the species name *below* the cut line (you will remove the upper half in spring).

Closing up/covering containers

- **Jugs:** Seal with duct tape around the middle (again, no caps).
- **Pots: Two options: 1) Cover each pot with plastic wrap** secured with an elastic, then poke holes in the plastic. Good for a few pots. **2) Place pots in clear plastic bins for security/stability. Bin lids and bottoms also need holes punched/drilled all across them** to ensure moisture can enter into/drain from each pot.

Storing outside

- **Place containers/bins outside** where they'll get snowed/rained on. Do not store in a garage, shed, or greenhouse or under eaves. A shady spot is fine.
 - **Pick a location** where containers won't be knocked over by dogs, snowblowers, etc.
 - **Handle containers with care in winter**—plastic becomes brittle in cold temps.
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Spring: The tricky season!

Through the winter, containers are generally fine as they remain mostly frozen. **Once temperatures start rising in spring**, start monitoring conditions because this is the tricky season when things can go off the rails:

- **When daytime temps stay consistently above freezing, remove covers**—cut off upper half of jugs; remove plastic wrap and bin lids. Especially on warm/sunny days, covered containers can get so warm that seeds/seedlings overheat or rot.
 - **Ensure top of soil stays consistently moist.** If soil looks dry, water top layer lightly.
 - **If soil seems soggy**, move containers to a sunny location.
 - **Make sure containers are draining well.** You may find you need to poke more holes in the bottom of some to prevent sogginess.
 - **Watch for sprouting.** Expect several or even many seedlings per pot.
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After seedlings sprout

Wait to plant/re-pot until frost risk has passed and seedlings have at least two sets of leaves. A key thing to remember is that while you may see many seedlings per pot, **most will eventually die off** (survival of the fittest), leaving only one or a few stems. You can maximize the number of plants by dividing the soil block and planting each portion on its own. Three options for next steps:

1. **Plant in the ground:** Carefully remove each soil block from each container and plant it in a site suited to that species. For more plants, divide each block into smaller sections and plant each on its own. For example, you may be able to split the soil block from a large yogurt container into 2-6 blocks, depending on how well the seed germinated. A larger container can be divided even more.
2. **Grow for a while longer in the containers:** If you thin stems, you will likely end up with fewer, stronger plants that will have a better chance of thriving once in the ground.
3. **Divide and replant into more pots:** Split soil blocks, replant in multiple containers, and let them grow up more. This will give you more plants to put in the ground later and/or share with others.

Water newly planted seedlings regularly for the first month and monitor/water as needed through the season. Even native plants need care when young.

Want to know more?

- **Visit** cleannorth.org/2022/08/25/want-to-grow-native-plants-but-cant-find-any-grow-your-own-using-winter-sowing/
- **Email** Clean North: info@cleannorth.org

