

Seedy Business

GROWING PLANTS FROM SEEDS

Last month we were inundated with seed catalogues, this stream of garden pornography crossed our doorsteps in unrelenting fashion as we ducked behind parted drapes waiting for the arrival of the mail. A mad dash followed to retrieve those glossy bound magazines spilling onto the porch floor, how easy it would be if the seed companies delivered their wares in plain brown wrappers.

This month, however, we still hide from our neighbors in shame as packages and thick padded envelopes protrude from the mailbox or rest against the front door. We failed in our self-imposed discipline of ordering just a few seed packages and now daily tomes of the material arrive. Innocently as I retrieve these packages and greet my neighbors in the morning I casually hold up the box and chirp "seeds". They quickly duck inside wondering how long the police will take to bust their neighbors grow operation. These packages make it down to the basement; cozy amongst the burping furnace and tiers of glowing fluorescent lights, they begin their journey towards adulthood.

To grow a plant from seed is a miracle that all should experience. That tiny dried lump has the energy and desire to become the grandest tree or the most majestic flower and it is along this journey that many discover the joy of gardening.

Growing plants from seed offers us a world of opportunity, for though the importation of live plants is fraught with red tape, consumer packaged seed can easily cross the border into our garden. With patience and time, the economic rewards of producing plants from seed are ten fold. Instead of that \$12.00 perennial you now have forty little plants sitting in pots at a fraction of the cost.

This is, however, a seedy business; for the land mines are many in the world of germinating seed. Seeds need to be germinated and grown in a clean healthy environment. This may seem obvious but is that drafty basement corner the best? Is next to the furnace too warm and will I remember to check on them daily if they are in the far corner behind the service room?

Seedlings are babies of the plant world and consequently need several conditions met before they mature into full size garden plants. The seedling environment and all material used in the seeding process should be clean. One tablespoon of bleach in a gallon of water is a very effective sterilizer and should be used to wash all seeding surfaces, pots and other associated seeding paraphernalia.



Temperature is perhaps the most important environmental factor when germinating packaged seeds that do not have specific dormancy requirement. The temperature ideally should fall between 25-30 °C (or 77-86 °F). If your basement is not that warm you might want to consider purchasing heating cables that will provide supplemental bottom heat beneath the seeding flat or pan. These often thermostatically controlled rubber encased wires are a permanent fixture in most commercial operations.

Light of a relatively high intensity is required to produce sturdy seedlings. Caution however is needed here for with light comes heat which can burn tender seedlings. Fluorescent grow tubes are best, adjustable as the seedlings grow but initially held just inches above the seed flat until seedlings emerge.

The greatest pitfall to seedling success is watering. As the tender sprouts emerge, the thoughtless gardener douses them with cold water. The sturdy survive albeit in shock and slowly make their way to adulthood. Water only with fresh tepid (room temperature) water, if it comes from a chlorinated municipal system let it sit for several hours to dissipate the chlorine. Of course, you are watering with the Haws watering can you received for Christmas, with the brass rose inverted; this the seedlings will surely appreciate.

With time and effort, those dried little lumps will emerge and if treated with care will grow into mature plants. Forty years from now you may point to a towering neighbourhood tree and say I grew that in my basement. Your neighbours may then realize, if they have not already, that it was not a grow operation conceived by some pervert, it was just a fanatical gardener.

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Originally published in *The London Free Press*