

Winter Sowing in Ontario

Winter sowing in Ontario is a popular, low-maintenance method to start hardy plants outdoors during winter using recycled containers, like milk jugs. This method takes advantage of natural freeze-thaw cycles for germination, perfect for native perennials, herbs, and cool-season veggies. It requires minimal supplies, just containers, soil, seeds, duct tape, and a sunny spot. It creates mini-greenhouses, saving money on grow lights, and produces strong seedlings by mimicking natural conditions for cold stratification.

HOW IT WORKS

1. **Containers:** Use clear plastic jugs (milk, water) or bottles, cut in half to create a hinge. Cut drainage holes in the bottom and some airflow holes near the top.
2. **Soil and Seeds:** Fill with moist potting mix and plant hardy seeds (perennials, natives, kale, spinach). Tape the halves together.
3. **Placement:** Place jugs outside in a sunny spot where they get snow and rain; no indoor setup needed.
4. **Germination:** Seeds experience natural cold stratification and sprout when conditions are right in spring, producing strong, ready-to-transplant seedlings.

WHAT TO SOW

- **Perennials:** Most benefit, especially natives like milkweed, coneflower, black-eyed susan, yarrow, aster, and goldenrod.
- **Hardy Annuals:** Poppies, calendula, snapdragons, love-in-a-mist.
- **Cool-Season Veggies:** Lettuce, kale, spinach, swiss chard, broccoli, cabbage, peas, radishes.

WHAT TO AVOID

- **Tender Annuals:** E.g. tomatoes, peppers, petunias
- **Warm-Season Crops:** E.g. Cucumbers, squash, melons
- **Root Vegetables**

WHEN TO START

- **Late December** (after Winter Solstice) for perennials and hardy types
- **February/March** for hardier veggies and annuals

BENEFITS FOR ONTARIO GARDENERS

- **Saves Money and Space:** No need for heat mats or grow lights
- **Stronger Plants:** Seedlings develop resilience from natural exposure
- **Mimics Nature:** Excellent for native plants needing cold stratification
- **Easy Transplanting:** Roots aren't disturbed much, and plants are ready earlier

KEY SUPPLIES

- Milk jugs or 2L bottles
- Scissors or knife
- Drill or hot glue gun
- Duct tape
- Permanent marker
- Seed-starting mix
- Native/hardy seeds

HOW TO WINTER SOW

Most native plants need their seeds to go through several freeze/thaw cycles so that their outer shell softens, enabling them to sprout (also called cold moist stratification or CMS). This process is naturally provided by our winter and spring seasons. Plants that require stratification cannot simply be sown directly outdoors either in the soil or in pots in the spring; they must be sown in the winter.

INSTRUCTIONS

If seeds are winter-sown, the number of cold moist stratification days mentioned on the seeds' label is the *minimum* number of days they must be outside in cold temperatures. To determine the latest that seeds can go outside, the best practice is to count backwards from the month that is best for your area (e.g. for Ottawa, count backwards from mid-April).

Note: There is no harm in winter sowing for a longer period of time than the minimum stated on the label. Similarly, seeds that are marked as "Can be sown in spring" can still be winter-sown; the spring designation means the seeds do not require CMS, but they will not be harmed by it.

Timing: Winter sowing should be done between December and February.

WRITTEN INSTRUCTIONS

- Fill a flower pot (or juice jug, clamshell container, plastic container) with potting soil.
- Make sure the pot has drainage holes at the bottom.
- Water the soil and press down firmly on it.
- Sprinkle a package of seeds into the pot.
- For most seeds, gently stir the seeds into the soil with your finger or a small stick.
- For “surface sow” seeds, press the seeds onto the soil surface.
- Use two methods to label your seeds; an oil-based marker is ideal.
- Place the pots outside in a north- or east-facing area (never south).
- Make sure rain and snow can get in the pots (i.e. not under an overhang).
- Optional: Cover the pots with an old window screen or netting.
- Leave the pots outside until the spring.
- Once the snow melts, make sure the soil does not dry out.
- Make sure the pots get morning sun exposure.
- Once the seeds have germinated and the seedlings reach a few inches in height, they can be transplanted into your garden.
- If many seedlings are growing tightly together in the pot, place a clump of soil and seedlings in a small basin of water and gently stir it around to separate the roots, then either replot the seedlings or transplant them into your garden.
- Once you have transplanted the seedlings into your garden, keep them watered until they get established (usually a couple of weeks).

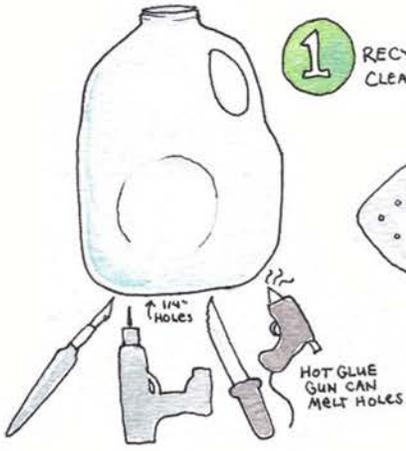
SOURCE:

<https://peterboroughmastergardeners.com/2022/12/26/the-kiss-principle-winter-sowing-101/>



WINTER SOWING

• VEGETABLE SEEDS
• NATIVE PLANT SEEDS
GOOD FOR STRATIFICATION



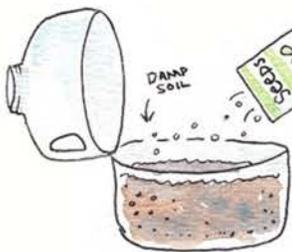
1 RECYCLE JUGS OR CONTAINERS
CLEAN, REMOVE CAP
KEEP CAP FOR LABELS!

ADD 1/4" HOLES TO BOTTOM OF JUG OR CONTAINER

2 SLICE JUG IN HALF



3



4

ADD SEEDS, DON'T OVERSOW!
PLANT AT DEPTH LISTED ON SEED PACKET

5

Mini Greenhouse
PUT IN FULL SUN OUTSIDE



Keep soil moist



6

OPEN IN SPRING TO HARDEN OFF SEEDLINGS FOR SEVERAL DAYS TO A WEEK. THEN GENTLY SEPARATE + TRANSPLANT IN GARDEN



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