

# Successful sowing

Raising plants from seed is great fun. It's also the cheapest way to fill your garden with flowers and vegetables. Follow this guide for sowing success.

The most important factor when raising seed is to use a good quality compost. Make sure you use a tried and tested Best Buy seed compost. For the latest Best Buys, see the Jan/Feb issue of Which? Gardening

## Problem solving

Growing plants from seed is very satisfying when it works - but frustrating when it doesn't. Use the advice below as a guide to solving some common problems.

### Q What temperature should I sow at?

**A** There is a common misconception that the higher the temperature, the better the seeds will germinate and the faster the young plants will grow.

In fact, for most seeds a temperature of about 15°C is best. Any cooler and germination can be slow and erratic; any higher and seedlings may develop too quickly and become weak and leggy. Some plants, such as celery, cyclamen, freesia and lettuce won't germinate at all at temperatures above 18°C.

It is beneficial to turn up the heater for seeds from tropical and sub-tropical plants. Cacti, impatiens, cucumber and foliage houseplants all germinate better at around 21°C. In general, a sunny windowsill in a heated room is a better bet than an airing cupboard. Above all, follow the instructions on the seed packet carefully to ensure the best results.

### Q How much light is necessary?

**A** Most seed will germinate equally well in light or dark conditions, but there are a number of important exceptions.

Seeds that are best germinated in light are generally the very fine ones. Examples include African violets, ageratum, antirrhinum, begonia, *Bellis perennis*, celery, *Cineraria maritima*, gloxinia, impatiens, lobelia, mimulus, nicotiana, petunia, primula and salvia.

Examples of seeds which tend to germinate better in the dark include cyclamen, mesembryanthemum, nemesia, nigella and verbena.

### Q Why do seeds germinate unevenly?

**A** It's frustrating to find seedlings emerging in patches rather than evenly over the whole seed tray. This tends to happen because the seeds have been sown at slightly different depths. When sowing in pots or trays, use a block of wood to create an even, level surface for sowing. Stand the seedtray in water, until you see moisture on the surface, and then allow it to drain before sowing. To cover the seed to an even depth, sieve compost over the surface and gently firm it down. When you are sowing seed outdoors, create a uniform surface on which to sow by covering the surface with a thin layer of sieved soil mixed with multi-purpose compost, and firm this down lightly.

### Q Why do some seedlings flop?

**A** Seedlings that flop usually do so as a result of damping off. This fungal infection results in the stems becoming too thin at soil level so that the seedlings topple over and die - often in circular

patches. You may also see a white mould on the compost's surface. To prevent damping off, clean your pots or seed trays thoroughly before use and always use fresh compost. Sow seeds as thinly as possible and use tap water rather than water from a water butt. Water from below to avoid wetting the seedlings' leaves.

## **How to sow**

Before you start, read the information on the back of the seed packet. Use the timings and sowing depths as your guide.

It is important to start with the right materials. You'll need clean pots and seedtrays and fresh compost. If you have used the containers before, clean them thoroughly with disinfectant, rinse with clean water and allow them to dry before you start.

Spread the compost evenly and firm lightly with a piece of wood. It's not vital to do this but you can moisten the compost by standing the seedtray in a bowl of water until the surface of the compost darkens. Allow the compost in the seedtray to drain before sowing.

Sow the seed as evenly and thinly as possible so that the germinated seedlings have plenty of space to grow. If possible, space the seed individually in rows; you'll find that five rows of eight seeds fit neatly into a standard seedtray.

Cover the seed evenly with compost, cover with clingfilm or pop into a plastic bag, and keep in a warm, well-lit position out of direct sun. Inspect daily for signs of germination.

Once the seedlings have become well established and have at least a pair of leaves, prick them out (see right).

## **Very fine seed**

Some seed is very small and is difficult to sow evenly and at the right depth. Fine seed is also particularly prone to drying out. However, you can overcome all these difficulties using the following method:

Run your fingers through the compost to remove lumps or pieces of fibrous material before filling the seed tray.

Mix the seed with dry silver sand (available from garden centres).

This not only helps you spread the seed out evenly, but the light-coloured sand shows up against the dark compost, so you can see where you have sown.

After sowing, dust with silver sand and cover the seed tray with clingfilm to prevent it drying out. Once germination starts, cut slits in the plastic, then remove before the seedlings touch it.

## **Caring for seedlings**

### **Pricking out**

As soon as seedlings have developed leaves and are large enough to handle, they should be pricked out (transplanted). Don't hold them by their stems as this can damage them. Instead, lift each seedling up carefully by a leaf, while supporting the roots with a dibber.

### **Potting on**

As seedlings grow, they need to be potted on into larger containers to allow their roots to develop and give them access to fresh supplies of nutrients. Pot seedlings on into individual containers of compost 7.5-10cm in diameter.