



Success with seeds

John Trim FNV Southern Branch

Seed Sowing

I am afraid it rather annoys me when I see bags of potting compost labelled up as suitable for seed sowing, cuttings and potting on. A single compost really isn't up to performing all those functions.

Let's take this step by step. A compost suitable for seed sowing will be low in fertilizer; it will also be fine in structure with the addition of sharp or silver sand to aid aeration & drainage. My choice is Levingtons F2 with sand. This is what the professionals use.

Potting compost is fine for potting on but the structure is too coarse for seed sowing plus the fertilizer content would burn the roots of young seeds as they germinate.

The seed tray

The tray I most commonly use is the half size seed tray. As I often say when it comes to sowing seed, little & often is the rule, you don't want a glut of one sort of vegetable. Just think for a moment how many cauliflowers would you eat in two weeks. If you sowed a dozen seed of an F1 variety you would realistically expect 100% germination & with a little care with the cultivation you would grow a dozen cauli's to maturity and those dozen cauli's would all be ready in a 14 day window. So think before you sow. Of course there is a way of delaying cropping. Plant out 6 of your cauliflowers & leave the other 6 in their pots for another two weeks. Then plant out those. Not an ideal situation as the remaining plants will probably become pot bound and never achieve their full size but at least this will spread the cropping period over a month or so.

Preparing the compost

Never use cold compost for seed sowing. I keep a bag in my heated greenhouse so the temperature of the compost is the same as the environment that my plants will grow in. Tip some of the compost into a container & add some warm water, just enough so that when you squeeze a handful of compost a few drops of water are forced out. Fill your seed tray to the brim & give it a tap on the potting bench. You can use a piece of plywood 'the same size as the surface of the seed tray' with a handle attached to lightly compress the compost. Do not firm the compost too much. Remember that your young plants will grow best in warm, moist compost in a position which provides good light.



Sowing the Seed

The size of the seed that you are sowing will give a good indication of how deep they should be sown in the compost. The rule of thumb is to sow twice the depth of the size of the seed. Hence runner bean seed will be sown approximately 2" deep and at the other end of the scale celery seed is so fine it is simply scattered over the surface of the compost and not buried at all. Please note that with the larger seed 'peas, beans etc' I sow each seed into individual pots.

Brassica's have fairly large seed so I like to sow these as individuals 1" apart in all directions and approximately quarter of an inch deep. I use a small plastic dibber for the job but a pencil will do just as well. For slightly smaller seed 'like lettuce' I sow these in a row. I make a shallow indentation in the compost using a small piece of wood cut to the length of the seed tray. I turn this

on edge so that when pressed lightly into the compost it forms a shallow 'V'. Always sow the seed thinly, as it can be a difficult job to separate the young plants if thickly growing together. They will also be leggy in growth as they compete with each other for the light. Once the seed has been sown cover with fine compost or vermiculite, cover the tray with a sheet of glass or plastic bag and pop into a propagator. Given the right conditions most seed will germinate in approx 7 to 10 days. Once you see the young plants emerging from the compost, remove the glass and let the plants grow on until they are large enough to handle. To pot on, tease the plants out of the compost with a fork whilst holding the plant by a seed leaf. Don't worry if the seedlings have become a little leggy at this stage, just dibber a deeper hole so that the compost buries the stem right up to the pair of seed leaves. Do take care not to handle the stem of the young plants. You have a naturally occurring acid on your hands which can damage tender stems.

Some seed can be difficult to germinate. Parsnips can take around 3 weeks to get going. In this case I take no chances & prefer to pre germinate the seed.



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Use wet blotting paper or strong kitchen tissue that has been moistened. Spread the seed out 1" apart in all directions on the paper then pop this into a plastic bag or plastic container and in a few days the seed should germinate. This will be apparent when a small shoot appears from the seed. Don't let this get too long before you sow the seed in its permanent situation. Some seed benefit from being soaked overnight in a jar of water to soften their shell. Peas are an example of this. Though do not soak Runner Bean seed as this could induce the disease 'Halo Blight'.

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The cucumber family can also be difficult to germinate as they need a higher temperature. This is my method. Half fill a 4" pot with moist compost, sow one seed per pot on edge & approximately half an inch deep. Pop the pot into a plastic bag and then place in an airing cupboard. On the morning of the third day the seed will have germinated. Some times it takes till the evening to do so. Remove and place in good light. Fill the pot with compost as the plant grows. The stem will put out more root as it is covered with compost and hence develop a good root ball.

Keep in mind sowing dates for the cucumber family and the tomatoes. If you intend growing in a cold greenhouse do not sow the seed before mid March. Raise the plants indoors to plant out in May once all danger of frost has passed. 'This relates to a southern location.'

A couple of things to keep an eye on. If you find some of your young plants germinate and then keel over, this may be due to a fungal disease called damping off. In this case spray with 'Cheshunt Compound' which is 15% copper sulphate and will prevent the disease. Spray the surface of the compost after sowing the seed and repeat once the plants have germinated. In fact I

always follow this procedure when sowing seed.

If the plants germinate and then seem to disappear, look for any remaining stalks. If a stubby plant stalk is evident this is more than likely the work of a woodlouse. 'Deal with them as necessary'.

Of course not all plants take kindly to being raised in seed trays and potted on. Many of the root family 'such as carrots & beetroot' grow best if sown directly in the ground. They don't take kindly to potting on as this can induce multi fanged specimens which are little use in the kitchen. One last tip, always use tepid water when watering your young plants. Cold water would give them too much of a shock.

Remember that fine celery seed sprinkled onto damp compost, well don't forget that celery is a bog plant and should be watered every day using a fine hand sprayer. Do not aim the spray directly at the compost as this could blow the seed away, just mist over head and let the drifting spray gently wet the compost.

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