



Winter Sowing

Seed Starting Made Easy: Let Nature Do the Work

Story By **Beverly Thevenin** Photography By **Nancy Rosene**

The Hands-On Gardener

Most people probably think the only way to start seeds in January is to pot them and place them on racks under special lighting in the basement or dining room. However, there is an easier and cheaper method called winter sowing. The snow may be falling, the wind may be blowing and the temperature definitely dropping, but that is the perfect time to winter sow some seeds, put the containers outside and forget about them. (Well, almost.)

Ten years ago my husband and I built our home, and a big, empty yard cried out to be filled. While looking for seed starting methods online, I stumbled upon the website wintersown.org. This method sounded too good to be true: Use freely available recycled containers, grow plants for mere pennies and achieve healthy, hardy seedlings with no damping off. Trees, shrubs, perennials, annuals, vegetables and herb seeds planted in the warm indoors patiently wait outside for the right temperature and lighting to germinate.

The USDA describes winter sowing as, “A propagation method used throughout the winter where temperate climate seeds are sown into protective vented containers and placed outdoors to foster a naturally timed, high percentage germination of climate tolerant seedlings.”

After further reading about the method online at the GardenWeb Wintersown forum, I gathered the supplies and dug in (so to speak).

Constructing the Containers

Search the recycling bin for milk cartons (plastic and cardboard), plastic coffee cans, produce boxes for strawberries and spinach, large soda bottles, cat litter tubs, cottage cheese containers and drinking cups.

The preparation of the container depends on the type used. All containers need a height of at least 5 inches with drainage holes and ventilation slits in the top. For milk cartons, cut small holes or slits in the bottom and cut the container in half, but leave a hinge at the handle corner and remove the top cap. The pouring hole will provide the ventilation and allow for rainwater to enter. For cardboard orange juice containers, cut

Most materials for winter sowing can be found around the house.



the box and remove the top portion. To create a top once planted, stand up two wood skewers. Attach the clear plastic bag to the container with tape or clothes pins. The tops of all containers should be clear to translucent.

Planting the Seeds

Unlike indoor seed propagation, there is more wiggle room in the timeline for winter sowing. To get a basic sense of the schedule, January is the perfect month to sow the perennial seeds that need a period of cold stratification, such as rudbeckia, delphinium and milkweed (*Asclepias*). I start hardy perennials that

Recycled milk jugs are readily-available containers for planting.



Labeling the container will help avoid confusion at planting time.



ABOVE: Tomato seedlings begin to appear. The lid needs to remain until all threat of frost has passed.

don't need the freezing and thawing cycles in February and March, as well as cold hardy vegetables such as lettuce. Summer vegetables and annuals get potted the middle of March through April. Tomatoes are one of my favorite veggies to winter sow; and leeks, which require a long growing season, do wonderfully. Fill the prepared container with 3 inches of good potting soil and water thoroughly.

Sprinkle the seeds, pat down and either cover with soil or leave exposed, depending on the seed requirements.

Secure the lid depending on the type of container used. Cover smaller containers with plastic bags or plastic wrap. Duct tape works well on milk cartons and lasts through the winter.

Label the carton by either writing the name of the plant on duct tape with marker and taping to the bottom (which prevents fading) or on top with a Decocolor Paint Marker (which holds up to the sun).

Set the container into the garden and let nature do her work. If the



LURVEY

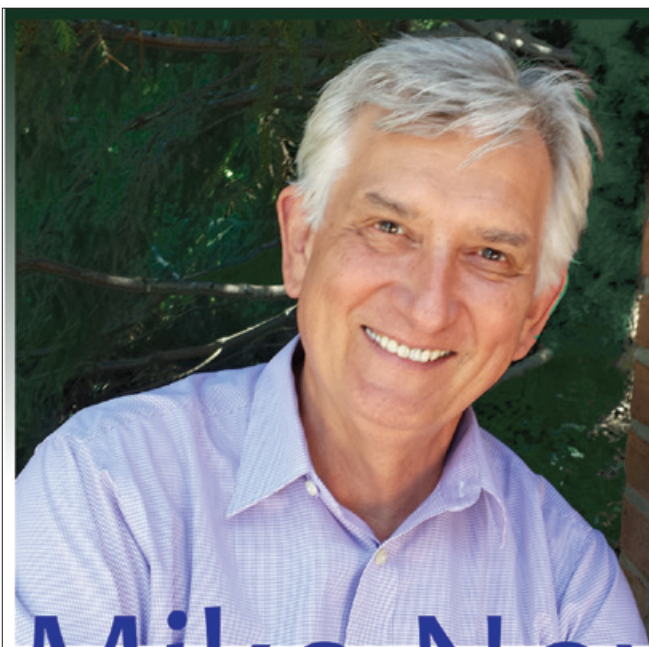


New Garden Center Opening Spring 2016

2550 E. DEMPSTER ST., DES PLAINES, IL 60016

847.824.7411

WWW.LURVEYS.COM



Mike Nowak

Chicago's voice of gardening and
the environment for eighteen years.

podcasts and more at mikenowak.net



ABOVE and OPPOSITE PAGE: The kitchen garden assortment includes lemon thyme, onions, dill, carrots and oregano. **RIGHT:** Foxglove (*Digitalis*) grows well when started by this method.

weather is dry, supplemental water may be necessary. As the seedlings grow, create more ventilation in the lid.

Transplanting the Seedlings

After providing water and increased ventilation as the weather warms up, plant the seedlings into the ground at the same time greenhouse grown plants would be planted. No need to harden off.

Depending on how thickly the seeds were sown, there are several methods for planting. If thinly sown, gently remove each seedling and plant individually. If thickly sown, either use the Brownie method, removing the soil and seedlings in one clump and cutting the soil into bite-size pieces, or the Hunk-O-Seedlings, scooping out a spoonful of seedlings. Plant the hunk, and let the seedlings fight it out.

Due to some serious procrastination, I transplanted my last jug of leeks July 1st





this last year, but had a bountiful harvest for soup, quiche and casserole. Tomatoes have been known to grow through the milk jug lid before I get them planted, yet go on to produce large, meaty fruit.

With winter sowing I've been able to grow and experiment with many varieties I would have been hesitant to try. My wintersown *Passiflora incarnata* climbs on the trellis (although it has yet to flower); *Malva sylvestris mauritiana*, *Digitalis grandiflora* and *Thalictrum rochebrunianum* reach for the sky; hostas help fill the empty spaces; and poppies, *Impatiens balfourii* and *Lychnis coronaria* reseed with wild abandonment. 🐦

Beverly Thevenin is an Indiana Master Gardener and freelance writer. If not in the garden, you'll find her quilting or cooking.

Visit us again in the spring as the new gardening season begins!



Green Glen Nursery & Garden Center

Retail: 815.722.3133
www.greenglennurseries.com

2413 Laraway Road
Joliet, IL

Wholesale: 815.723.1140
www.greenglennurseriesinc.com

Countryside

Adding color to your life inside and out for over 50 years!

We invite you to explore our 28 acres of quality, "**Countryside Grown**" plants! Stop in the Garden Center for all your gardening needs and visit our full service Flower Shop for all of life's celebrations!

Visit our website to learn more about our landscape services, gardening advice and the latest workshops and seminars.
www.countrysideflowershop.com

Open year-round, offering all your gardening needs in one stop!

Open Daily • 5301 E. Terra Cotta Ave., Crystal Lake, IL
(Rt. 176, 1/2 mile W. of Rt. 31) • 815.459.8130

vern goers
greenhouse, inc.

5620 S. Oak St.
Hinsdale, IL 60521
www.verngoersgreenhouse.com
630-323-1085

**Family Owned
Since 1966**

Start a family tradition of growing together.

Changing Addresses? Let us know!

Name: _____ Old Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

New Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Subscriber ID# (from mailing label) _____

SEND TO:

Chicagoland Gardening
P.O. Box 730,
Downers Grove, IL
60515-0730

OR CALL:

888-265-3600