

Wally's Weekly News 12th July 2008
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SEED PLANTING TIME

July is the month to begin sowing seeds in trays or punnets to grow on for planting out later.

Start with the more hardy types this month and then the more tender ones later in August.

Sowing your own seeds for plants makes economical sense. The cost of transport and fertilisers that nurseries now have to pay to grow and get their products to garden centres will mean that these costs will be passed onto you, when you buy seedlings in punnets this coming spring.

It is simple logic; if you have to pay several dollars for half a dozen lettuces in a punnet and it costs you less than that for a packet of lettuce seeds, which should give you over a hundred lettuce plants, what is better value?

All you need to do is learn how to germinate seeds successfully and grow them onto the stage where you can plant them out into your gardens. Which is very easy once you get the knack.

Once you have mastered the art of germination and growing seedlings on, you will have more plants that you could ever hope to use, year after year.

You can even go a stage further and allow one of each of a crop to mature and go to seed and harvest your own seed at no cost for future plantings. If you do this year after year you will develop a strain of plants that are perfectly suited to your growing conditions. All you have to do is let the best looking plant of a crop go to seed. Never let an inferior looking plant go to seed for this purpose as you will be collecting inferior seed.

For the most success in germinating and growing on, you should consider buying a heat pad and making a cold frame. Heat pads for seed germination should be available from most good garden centres.

A cold frame can be made out of plastic or glass and the most simple one would be an old drawer that is about 15cm deep or deeper and one or more sheets of glass to cover the drawer area.

This should be located outside in a sunny area (for winter) sitting on some bricks or similar so it is not in contact with wet ground. In summer you would move it to a partly shaded area where it does not get all day sun and cause the seedlings to dry out and burn.

Using a heat pad to warm the seedling trays into which you have sown your seeds means that you will germinate much quicker and get a better strike of more seeds than you would without one.

Punnets that you have purchased in the past are ideal for doing small batches of seeds having one punnet for each type of plant you wish to grow. A plastic label with the type of seed named along with the date you sowed the seeds should be placed at one end of the punnet.

The best medium for placing in the punnet is a good friable potting mix. Seed raising mixes are more expensive and generally speaking are not as good as a potting mix for best results.

Fill the punnet to two thirds full with the potting mix and then using a sieve such as you have in the kitchen, sieve some more of the mix over what has been placed in the punnet.

This places a nice fine layer of mix for you to sprinkle the seeds on.

The amount of seeds you sow should be a bit more than the number of plants you require and the seeds should be spaced nicely apart as best able.

Next make up a solution of **Magic Botanic Liquid (MBL)** in non chlorinated water at 20 mls per litre into a trigger type sprayer and mist the exposed seeds to make the whole area nice and moist. Then lightly sieve a little more mix over the seeds to partly cover and mist again. Most seeds like a little light to germinate so they do not need to be completely covered. The **MBL** assists greatly in rapid germination and gives the seedlings a great start.

Last season I had one gardener tell me that by using **MBL** on the pumpkin seeds he was germinating, it took just over a week for the plants to be ready for planting out, normally it would be 2-3 weeks.

Now that the seeds are sown, place the punnet onto your heat pad and mist twice a day with the **MBL** solution, which can have more non chlorinated water added to it to make it about 5mls per litre ratio.

It is very important that the mix and seeds are kept moist and you must remember to mist regularly when using a heat pad.

Where the pad and punnets are placed is not important but should be somewhere that you are going to be a few times a day such as in the kitchen. (so you don't forget to mist regularly)

Once you see a strike, with a number of the seedlings pushing up, with their first embryo leaves, you need to move the punnet to your cold frame because the germinated seedlings need overhead natural light.

This is the time that some gardeners make the mistake of not placing the freshly germinated seedlings into proper light. When the natural light is coming sideways such as through a window then the baby seedlings will stretch and grow towards the light. The stems stretch making them weak and prone to the disease which we call dampening off.

Once out into the cold frame or on a bench in a glasshouse the watering requirements will lessen greatly and likely a daily misting will be all that is required as there is now no under heat to dry the growing medium. The seedlings will soon develop what we call the first true set of leaves and in doing so will begin to gather greater amounts of energy from the sun.

Seedlings are grown on till they reach a suitable size to handle and transplant (Pricking out) into either small individual pots or into a larger seedling tray, nicely spaced apart individually to grow on.

In most cases about 6 seedlings to a punnet or even better one per cell in a cell tray. Before you prick out, spray the young plants with **Vaporgard** and leave them for a day.

Then you plunge the punnet into a bucket of non chlorinated water till it stops bubbling.

With the mix being really saturated means it is easier to prick out each plant with minimal root damage.

To make this task easier take an old teaspoon and with a hammer flatten out the spoon part and then grind the spoon so that it has a blunt point. This can be used like a little spade to aid the separation of the seedlings.

Grow your seedlings in their new containers till they are of a suitable size to plant out.

When they are about ready to plant out spray them once again with **Vaporgard** which reduces transplant shock and then wait a day or two before planting into the garden.

Placing 2 litre plastic bottles, with their bottoms cut off and cap removed, over the seedlings will give them a great start. This can achieve 2 to 3 times the growth

compared to a seedling without the protection.

Now what to do with the seeds not sown or ones collected?

Fold seed packets, to seal and with collected seeds place in small plastic bags with a label saying what they are. These are then placed in a sealed glass jar and stored in the fridge.

The cold temperatures give a false winter and will aid greatly, when you come to germinate the next batch. Some seeds keep better than others so you can expect that most seeds will be good for at least a year and in some cases over 20 years.

There are good seed stand ranges available from garden centres which include Mr.Fothergill's and Niche Seeds.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)