The Easiest Seed Starting: Winter Sowing and Seed Snails
With Erica Browne Grivas

Winter Sowing
Winter Sowing is a way of easily growing cold-tolerant seeds outdoors in semi-enclosed containers. It was pioneered by Trudi Greissle Davidoff in 2012 online (How To Winter Sow Seeds Outdoors)and is recommended by the USDA.

Benefits: Compared to indoor sowing, tough, weather-ready seedlings come up when they're ready, need less watering and don't require hardening off. Winter sowing uses potting soil instead of seed-starting mix and reuses common household materials. Seeds experience natural cold and moisture outdoors, then germinate as day length and temperatures increase. Because you transplant young, you can sow seeds closely.

Timing:
Typically done **December 21 – February**

What to grow:
Winter sowing works best for hardy and half-hardy annuals and temperate (non-tropical) perennials, especially seeds that benefit from cold stratification. It can be adapted for warm-season sowing, but timing is trickier and seedlings need closer attention.

Some favorites to try in the PNW:
Annual Flowers: Calendula, English daisy (Bellis), nigella, bread seed Poppies, feverfew, scabiosa, snapdragon, stock, sweet peas, Ammi
West Coast native annuals: California poppies, baby blue eyes (nemophila), showy milkweed (Asclepias speciosa)
Perennials: Lupine, Yarrow (Achillea), Hyssop (Agastache), Echinacea
West Coast native perennials: Bigleaf lupine (Lupinus polyphyllus), Western columbine (Aquilegia formosa), Western or Yaak Yarrow (Achillea m. var. occidentals or 'Yaak')
Vegetables: arugula, bok choy, kale, lettuce, spinach [more cold sensitive – plant closer to spring or add warmer protection]

Method:
Choose your container: milk jugs, takeout containers, Ziploc bags held on dowels in a crate, or pots within plastic tubs. All require openings for rain to enter and drain. They should be clear (not opaque) with room for 3-4" of soil depth.

Milk Jug Method Step-by-Step
- Premoisten potting soil
- Wash jug well, **remove cap**
- Cut jug in almost in half, leaving a hinge at the handle
- Make drainage holes on bottom and sides with a drill or a heated screwdriver; more is better
- Fill bottom with soil, sow seeds to proper depth, spray surface with water gently
- It's OK to sow closely – sometimes called the "hunk 'o seeds" method – when planting lift out sections like cutting a cake.
- Insert seed tag, close jug with packing or duct tape or twist ties through punched holes
- Write seed name on outside or on tape using waterproof marker or grease pencil.
- Place in partially shaded location
- Check for watering- keep evenly moist, open top in hot weather. Frost and snow are fine.
- Plant when seedlings are 2" high

Alternatives

Storage bins: I sow in plastic pots or produce clamshells set inside a clear plastic storage bin with a lid. The lid and base are drilled with copious drainage holes. This lets me grow smaller amounts.

Online resources –
WSU Winter Sowing
https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2073/2023/02/Winter-Sowing-Jump-Start-1.pdf

Seed Snails
Seed snails are a space-saving method developed by UK gardener Farida Sober that encourages deep root growth. Wrapping the seeds creates a humidity chamber, mimicking greenhouse conditions. They can be used indoors or outdoors, following seed-specific instructions. You can even use them to sprout-test seeds, propagate cuttings and bare-root plants. Indoor seed sowing may benefit from seed starting mix and humidity cover.

Benefits:
Saves space, seedlings need less coddling and watering than when grown in 2" cells, they don't need transplanting, and roots grow deeper.

Timing:
Will depend on whether you are growing indoors or out. Growing outdoors requires more monitoring in warm weather.

What to grow:
Works for most seeds given the specific temperature and light conditions they need.

Seed Snail Sowing Step-by-Step

- **Choose your wrap**: Sober uses polyethylene; others bubble wrap; non-plastic alternatives include burlap, newspaper, wax paper, and hemp or coco coir matting.
- **Premoisten potting mix** (I like to use a tub trug or bucket)
- **Write out your seed tag with waterproof marker or grease pencil**
- **Cut wrap into strips** 5" deep x 20-36" long; shallow rooting crops like lettuce can be 4," slow- or deep growing crops like leeks should be 7"
- **Spread potting mix** in an even layer nearly to the top, leaving about 3" on the sides open for potential expansion
- **Roll it**: Roll the wrap around the seeds, creating a small cylinder (the "snail"). Turn upright, tape with painters, duct or packing tape. (Painter's tape won't rip the foam.)
- **Tamp down soil** (a dibber, pencil or chopstick is helpful)
- **Place the Seeds**: follow packet directions for appropriate depth.
- **Stand upright on a tray or in a container. Place tag**, write on side if desired **Mist with water.**
- **Outside, place in partial shade or protected area**
- **Bottom water until leaves emerge**; then top-watering is OK.
- **Transplant –** Transplant when seedlings have at least one set of true leaves. Unwrap, separate, and plant. If seedlings outgrow the snail before planting, unwrap, add soil, and rewrap until you're ready.

Option: I use clear bins with drainage holes for extra protection in early spring.

That's it! Enjoy!

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