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Growing Pollinator Plants from Seeds

Starting some or all of your pollinator plants from seed can be fun, rewarding, and economical, but it can also prove frustrating. But by following a few basic principles, you can expect to have a fun and beautiful garden that pollinators love to visit.

A Primer on Seeds

Seeds are amazing! They are vessels of genetic code and stored energy, existing solely to launch new life at some new place sometime in the future. People often select plants that meet our needs, whether it be better food production, better flavor, bigger flowers, different colors, and more.

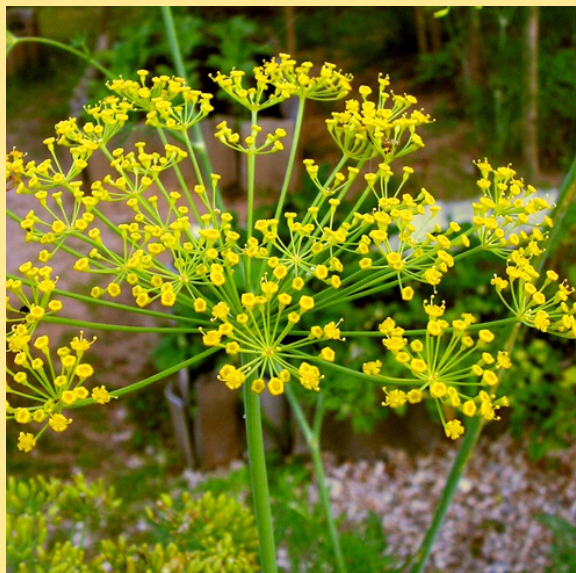


All Seeds are Unique

Some seeds remain viable hundreds of years, and others for less than one year. Some seeds won't even germinate until they've been through a fire or passed through the gut of an animal! Small or large, edible or poisonous: all seeds are unique and require different conditions to grow.

Put simply, **some seeds are easy to grow and some are hard**. Throw radish seeds on the ground when it's warm and three days later you'll have little plants. Other plants are more fickle, taking more time and care.

Seeds that Are Easier— Annuals, Vegetables, and Some Herbs

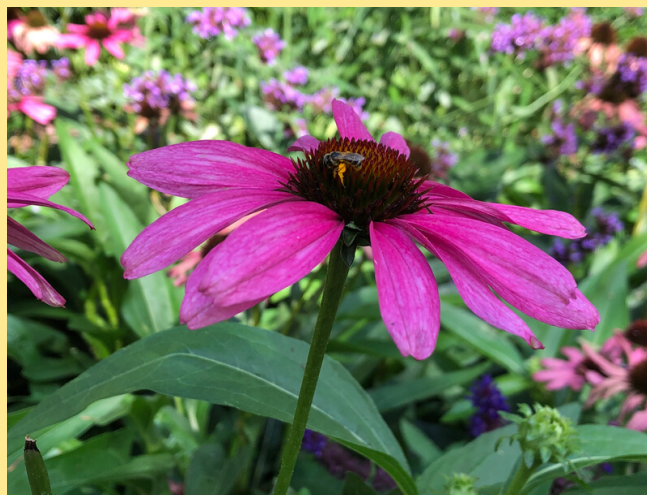


Many annuals are very easy to germinate and grow. Most germinate at 70 degrees Fahrenheit, and are often sown outdoors straight into the garden. Zinnias and sunflowers are particularly good varieties to sow outside. Annual herbs which can be sown outside include basil, dill, and parsley. Dill and parsley are even host plants for the black swallowtail.

A handful of annuals are cool season germinators that you'll want to start outside in the fall or early spring. These are uncommon. All packets of annual seeds will offer instructions on whether to sow either inside or outside.

Seeds that Are Harder— Perennials

A handful of perennials are pretty easy to sow straight in the garden, but most of them require extra preparation. One of the more trending reasons to grow perennials from seed is to create meadows or prairies over larger pieces of ground at a reasonable cost, but this comes with several challenges—the most difficult being weeds. To succeed, you will need to reduce the existing weed seed bank in the soil so they don't overwhelm the seeds you sow. Even still, some will still sprout and you'll need to know how to differentiate young weed plants from young perennials so you can manage them.



We understand that for a larger perennial garden, meadow, or prairie from seed, you'll need more information than what we've provided here. Fortunately, there are many good resources that can help you through the process. We have found that local prairie and meadow seed nurseries often offer very good reference material.

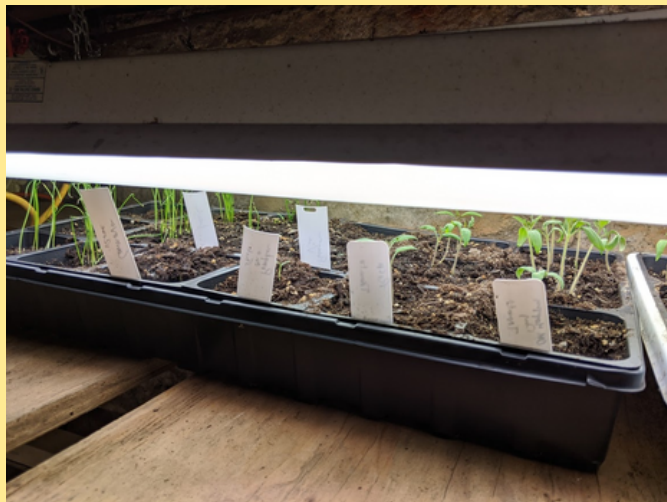
Sowing Seeds Outdoors

For the best germination you'll want to ensure good contact between the seed and soil. It's important to thoroughly till your soil and break it up into a fine texture. This is easiest done on days that are more dry. Rake the soil smooth, and then sow your seeds according to the packet.

Most seeds need to be planted at a certain depth, but some can simply be placed on the surface. Again, follow the instructions on the seed packet. Once the seeds are planted, water them thoroughly with a gentle spray that won't disturb the soil or cause soil runoff.



Perennial garden grown from seed



One example of an indoor growing setup

Sowing Annuals Seeds Indoors

To get a head start on the season with slower growing plants, you can—with minimal outlay—start annuals indoors under specially designed LED or fluorescent grow lights.

Start your seeds 6-8 weeks before your average last frost date. You can use commercially available seed trays, media mix, and grow-lights. Both Salvia and Pentas are best grown this way.

Types of Seed Mixes

It is always best to check the labels of seed mixes to see what plants are included. Anything called a **“prairie seed mix”** should consist entirely of native, North American prairie species, although some of these might be from regions quite apart from your own. It is usually recommended to buy seeds as locally as you can. For example, if you live in Southwest Ohio, you would want to source your seed from an Ohio, Indiana, or Kentucky company.

On the other hand, a **“meadow seed mix”** or **“wildflower seed mix”** can consist of anything, sometimes even aggressive or invasive species you do not want to grow. These seed mixes are commonly found in box stores at very low prices.



Seed Grown Perennials and Annuals Versus Garden Center Plants



Typical garden center zinnias



Typical zinnias grown from seed

The best choices for seed-grown plants are often different from those you would buy as plants from a garden center. The vast majority of our Zoo's Best Plants for Pollinators choices are difficult to grow from seeds.

In general there is a different look to gardens filled with seed grown perennials as opposed to store bought perennials. Neither is wrong or right. It is a personal preference.

Perennials and annuals from a garden center will tend to be tidier and smaller, and will feature larger or more intensely colored flowers. Garden center plants will usually have a conventional, suburban look.

Perennials and annuals grown from seed tend to be more similar to their wild growing cousins, and gardens made with them will look more like ecosystems you would find in nature. A garden grown from seed will have an old-fashioned look, with larger plants that are more exuberant and less formal. If you want to grow plants from seeds yourself and prefer a more manicured look, you can use rocks or bricks to create a boundary around the plant bed for a neater edge.