



It's **sow** easy

**Start your
seeds, outdoors
and in winter, using
recycled products and
Mother Nature.**

**Photos and story by
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If you're an experienced gardener like me, you want to grow a large variety of plants, and purchasing all nursery-grown plants can bust your budget. Growing seeds indoors is an acceptable alternative, but you have to invest in grow lights, heating devices, seed trays, peat pellets, and more. In addition, you need plenty of indoor space for this hobby.

What if there was a more natural, alternative method—one that doesn't require any indoor space, that uses recyclables and Mother Nature to control the germination process, is extremely easy, and considerably less expensive? I'd like to introduce you to winter sowing, a method that turns your recyclables into mini-greenhouses that are placed outside during the winter months. You watch the snow pile on top, wait for the weather to warm up, and seedlings magically appear. Here's how to do it.

Gather Your Supplies

You already have most of the supplies around the house. You'll need scissors, duct tape (3M's clear tape weathers better than the popular silver), sharp utility knife, plant labels, environmental garden marker, and inexpensive potting soil.



With a utility knife, cut your milk jug from one side of the handle to the other.



Your completed mini-greenhouse is filled with soil, seeds, water, plant label, and duct tape.



Take-out and bakery containers with lids make excellent mini-greenhouses.



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Several months prior to starting you'll want to collect plastic containers. Gallon milk jugs are easy to acquire from friends with families and they work very well. You can also use 2-liter pop containers and bakery and take-out containers. Containers should hold at least 3 inches of soil and have some headroom for the plants to grow.

Seeds to Sow

You can sow perennials during the cold months of January, February, and March. Annuals are sowed in the spring, and hence called spring sowing. There are some annual exceptions. You may have seen annuals such as marigolds, cleome, or cosmos planted the previous year, reseed, and show up the following year in your garden. These annuals are perfect for winter sowing.

Getting Started

Using a utility knife, poke several 1/2-inch slits in the bottom of your container for drainage. If using a milk jug, start from the bottom of the handle and cut a horizontal line through the container hinging back the top.

Next add 3 to 4 inches of soil. Moisten it well, making sure water drains out the bottom. You will want a muddy consistency throughout the container. Sow seeds according to the package directions. If you add additional soil

over the seeds, gently add more water. At this point it is best to add a plant label inside the container. When the weather warms up and the cover is removed, you'll know what you've planted. Use duct tape to seal the top to the bottom. With your marker, label the outside of the container and toss the cap.

The procedure is basically the same for plastic take-out and bakery containers. Cut holes in the bottom, add soil and water well, add your seeds and more soil, water again, and add a label inside the container. Cover the container, add holes or slits in the top for air transpiration, and label the container top.

Your mini-greenhouse is completed.

Mother Nature Takes Over

Place your mini-greenhouses outdoors on the east, south, or west side of your home. There isn't enough sunlight on the north side. Good locations include a table, deck, patio, or in the garden. Make sure rain and snow will reach the containers. Don't place under decks, awnings, or overhangs.

Go ahead and put your feet up, because it's at this point that Mother Nature takes over. Most seeds require stratification, a pre-chilling process necessary for germination to occur. Rather than the artificial chilling required by indoor sowing, outdoor sowing uses natural temperature fluctuations that freeze and thaw the seeds, loosening the seed coat to produce seedlings.

Spring Has Sprung

As spring arrives and the weather warms up, you'll want to harden off your plants by increasing the size of your transpiration holes or making more holes. Adding extra holes will ensure your plants don't get overheated inside the greenhouse. Around mid-May, the covers can be completely opened or removed. Watch your containers closely, making sure they get enough water. Condensation inside the

Place the mini-greenhouses outside, watch the snow pile up, and wait for the weather to warm up and seedlings to emerge.



Open the containers completely around mid-May, taking advantage of maximum rain and sun exposure.



Transplant when you have a strong root system.

containers is a good sign, indicating there's plenty of moisture. If there's no condensation or the soil is dry, water with your hose attachment on mist. You'll want to gently water the small, tender seedlings.

Planting Transplants

Winter-sown seedlings begin to sprout earlier and are ready to transplant sooner than other seedlings. You can wait

until you see the first two true leaves. My preference is to transplant when there's a strong root system.

What Are the Results?

In 2006, I grew a large assortment of plants for a new garden in my front yard using the winter sowing method. (That's it in the picture on page 37.) I was greatly rewarded in 2006 and again in 2007.

Winter sowing is easy, affordable, and addictive. With very little space, lots of recyclables, and reliable Mother Nature, you can grow an assortment of plants never imagined. **ng**

Master Gardener and professional photographer Michelle Mero Riedel has been teaching winter sowing classes in the Twin Cities for two years.

Almost all of the plants in the author's front yard were grown using the winter sowing method.

