

Seasonal Tip

Growing Plants from Seed

Gardeners have been doing it for centuries, yet we sometimes forget the benefits of starting plants from seed. As you start filling your 2013 calendar, don't forget to schedule seed planting. It's a simple and economical way to get the plants you want at a fraction of the cost of buying them. Often we can't find the plants we want at local nurseries or find it is cost prohibitive to buy dozens of the same variety. Growing from seed allows you more freedom and choices.

There are several terrific online garden planning websites and apps to help you manage your sowing. One of my favorite websites keeps track of what I've planted and includes both seeds and plants in the yard — it is smartgardener.com. It has neat online tools that allow you to lay out your garden, and then it sends you reminder emails about watering, transplanting and eventually harvesting so that you don't have to worry about forgetting or missing a step.

Starting seeds is easy. All you need is a sturdy tray with drainage (egg cartons work great), good sterile soil, artificial plant lights (preferably on a timer), plant markers, plastic bags or covers and water. Most garden centers sell pre-made kits, but they aren't really necessary.

Initially, soak the soil as directed and plant each variety of seed following instructions on the packet. Once you've planted them, cover the seeds with clear plastic bags to allow warmth and humidity to trigger germination. When the seeds have germinated and plants are established, I find it's a good idea to leave a fan blowing on the seedlings to help create strong root systems and stems that will better withstand the stress of transplanting. Be sure you label carefully as it's easy to mix up flower colors or varieties of the same plant family.

Keep a close watch for problems especially the fungus that causes "damping off" which quickly kills seedlings. CFC's Meredith Tucker grows plants from seed each year; "I grow all



Horse gentian (*Triosteum sp.*) drupes. Photo by Donna Bolzman.

my own plants under lights in my basement. This allows me a huge selection of varieties, and I'm always trying new things." Growing plants from seed, whether they are vegetables or native plants, is a great cure for the winter blues and at the same time expands your gardening choices. The sky's the limit!

— Sandra Alguire