

Growing Annuals and Perennials from Seed

The best plants start from good quality seeds or good root stock. Often times we are more concerned about our plants after they are in the ground without paying much attention to the seed quality. Good seeds that are planted at the right place in the right environment will yield quality plants. To ensure that you are receiving seeds of high quality, it is important to purchase seeds from a reputable dealer. Getting seeds from your neighbor or from another person often comes with its share of problems such as disease, insects, weeds and a low germination rate. Before you begin to sow any seed, it is important to read the label on the back of the seed package. The label will give information such as what time of the year to plant, the distance to plant from each other, light requirement, how often to water, USDA plant zone, and the time of the year plants will flower.

The planting containers do not have to be fancy and expensive. Almost any container with holes in the bottom for drainage will be perfect. For example, foam cups, egg cartons, or tin cans may be used but remember that store bought containers are available from landscape supply centers and the internet. It is important to wash all recycled containers before filling with soil media. This will get rid of existing weed seeds and some pathogens.

Most seeds will germinate in a sterilized peat or pine-bark growing media that are available at your local garden center. In addition, you make your own planting media by mixing one-part clean sand with two parts peat moss. If compost is available, you can incorporate properly decomposed organic matter in the mixture. Whatever the components of the mixture, be sure it's moist before planting. The planting depth of each variety of plant should be followed as directed on the label.

Some seeds require more light than others to germinate; if the seeds need light to germinate, don't cover them. Just press them lightly into the potting-mix surface. If they don't require light to germinate, then lightly add enough potting mix to cover them. When planting tiny dust-like seeds such as begonias and petunias, it is important to mix seeds with sand, spread them carefully with an old salt-shaker and leave them uncovered.

Keep seed pots and boxes moist, but not wet, with regular fine sprays of water. Place them in a warm, shaded area. In open shaded areas, cover pots or seed boxes with clear plastic kitchen wrap to keep the soil surface from drying out. Remember to remove all covers when seedlings begin to emerge and increase light as they develop. It is important to keep new seedlings moist as small containers dry out easily. Avoid keeping the soil soaking wet. Too much water will cause disease and will prevent seedlings from growing well and may eventually die. After seedlings have developed true leaves, applying a complete fertilizer that is slow release or at least 50 percent slow release can be beneficial. Adding too much fertilizer will often burn tender roots.

It is a common practice to remove some of the seedlings to avoid overcrowding which caused plants to compete for light, water, nutrients, and eventually grow weak. Once your plants have grown four to eight leaves, transplant indoor-grown seedlings into larger pots or in the garden. Consider how big your plants will grow and space them accordingly when you transplant. Always water seedlings thoroughly at transplanting and keep soil moist and not wet. For more information on growing annuals and perennials contact Grantly Ricketts at UF/IFAS Extension in Osceola at 321-697-3000 or email gricketts@ufl.edu.