

# **COMBLEY PLANTS**

## **SEED SOWING – A GUIDE**

This guide covers indoor spring sowing of annuals and perennials. Shrubs and tree seeds generally require different methods and are not covered. As with most things, there are always different ways of obtaining the same result – our methods are based on many years of successful sowing – however we don't claim that this is the best or only way of getting seeds to grow - if you use a different method and it works, then by all means keep doing it that way.

### **Storage**

Until ready to sow, all seed should be stored in a cool dry place out of direct sunlight. In these conditions most seeds should remain viable for a year or more. For longer term storage, place the packets in a sealed container (ideally with a sachet of silica gel) and place in the fridge – seed stored in this way can remain viable for several years or more.

### **Soaking**

Some seeds, for example Lupins and Sweet Peas, are encased in a very hard seed coat. Germination can be improved by soaking overnight in clean water prior to sowing.

### **Pots and compost**

All containers should be completely clean before use. Thoroughly clean previously used containers in a dilute solution of bleach and allow to dry. Good quality seed compost should be used – these have a low nutrient content. If you only have multipurpose compost available, mix 50:50 with vermiculite or horticultural grade sharp sand/fine grit.

For most seeds we use 10cm pots or half size seed trays, depending on the seed size and quantity. Although seed should not be sown too thickly, it is not a good idea to use too large a container – apart from being wasteful of compost it also means that the compost may remain too wet as the seedlings grow.

Fill the pot or tray loosely with compost to just above the rim level, then slide a straight edge over the rim to remove the excess. Firm the compost lightly by pressing down gently with a suitable press – a cork sanding block from the DIY store can be used, or one can be made from a flat piece of timber cut to size. After firming, the compost will ideally be about 6mm below rim level. Do not water the compost at this stage.

Now take the seed packet and tap it lightly to ensure that all the seed is at the bottom of the packet. Use scissors to cut off the top of the packet. Very fine seed should be sprinkled directly from the packet onto the surface of the compost, pour larger seeds onto the palm of your hand then sow them onto the compost, taking care to ensure they are fairly evenly spaced. After sowing, use your pressing board to very gently press the seeds into the compost.

### **Covering**

Most seeds need to be covered with a layer of sieved compost or vermiculite after sowing. The exception to this is very small seeds – as a general if the seeds are so small that you cannot see them on the surface of the compost, then don't cover with compost.

We prefer to use vermiculite rather than compost. Its easier to handle, allows light to reach the seeds and seems to greatly reduce the risk of 'damping off' – this is a fungal disease which commonly affects

seedlings, particularly if the growing medium is too cold and wet. Fine grade vermiculite should be used for all but the largest of seeds.

Whichever material you use, cover the seeds to a depth of 2 or 3 times the size of the seeds – in most cases this will mean a layer between 3 & 5mm thick. Don't forget to label the tray.

## **Watering**

Never water freshly sown seeds from above – this will disturb the seeds or even splash them out of the container. Fill a shallow tray with clean water to a depth less than the height of the seed tray or pot, then stand the container in the tray so that water is drawn from below. Once the surface layer of compost or vermiculite changes colour, the container can be removed and allow to drain. Some growers routinely use a solution of Cheshunt Compound or similar to minimize the risk of damping off – we don't use it and rarely have a problem with this disease.

## **Germination**

For successful germination, the correct temperature and humidity are vital. For most common seeds, a temperature of 15 to 20 C is adequate. A windowsill out of direct sunlight will usually suffice, although a heated thermostatic propagator is the ideal. If a propagator is not available, the seeds must be enclosed to maintain humidity – a sheet of glass or cling film can be used – with cling film take care to ensure that the film does not rest on the surface of the compost, as this could disturb small seeds.

## **Light or Dark?**

Some seeds need light to germinate, a few should be kept in the dark – most will not care either way. If in doubt, leave them in a light position. If kept dark, check regularly – as soon as the first seeds germinate move the container to a light position. Germination times can vary considerably – some seeds will germinate within a couple of days, other will take several weeks.

Once the seeds have started to germinate, the temperature can be reduced slightly. Humidity should slowly be reduced by gradually increasing ventilation – in a propagator the lid should be gradually raised, then removed completely after a few days. If using film or polythene, use a plant label to gradually lift the cover higher and allow air in. Keep the compost moist but do not overwater, particularly while the seedlings are small. Good light is now the most important factor – on a windowsill this can be difficult as the seeds will tend to get spindly – the light levels can be improved by placing a reflective surface behind the seedlings – kitchen foil on a piece of cardboard can be used.

Once the seedlings have a pair of true leaves (as opposed to the initial seed leaves), and are large enough to handle, they need to be 'pricked out' into another container, so that they are spaced further apart and can grow on. Larger seedlings can be pricked out straight into a 3.5" (9cm) pot, smaller seedlings should go into another seed tray, using multipurpose compost and spacing the seedlings about 1" (25mm) apart. Always handle the seedlings by the leaves, not the stem. When transplanting use a dibber to make a hole in the compost, and plant the seedling so that the compost level is just below the leaves. (This will normally mean burying a portion of the stem – this will not matter). If you try to plant the seedling at the same level as it was previously growing it will tend to flop over.

Small seedlings such as Lobelia should be transplanted in clumps of 4 or 5 plants rather than individually. This technique is also often used with spring sown perennials and grasses, to produce a larger plant more quickly.

The plants can now be grown on at a temperature of 10 to 15C. They should be gradually acclimatised to outdoor conditions by placing outside in a cold frame or sheltered spot by day, bringing them indoors at night or in cold weather. By mid May the plants should be ready to be planted outside in their final position.