

SOME NATIVE WILDFLOWER SEEDS NEED COLD STRATIFICATION TO SPROUT

Have you tried starting native wildflowers from seed indoors? Was it an epic fail, smashing success, or somewhere in the middle?

There are many native wildflowers that can be started easily indoors, in a similar manner you would use for something like broccoli, but there are others that aren't so obliging; they take a bit more effort. These tend to be species native to the colder parts of our nation.

Many wildflowers have developed mechanisms to keep their seed from germinating in the fall, allowing them to wait out winter in dormancy and then jump into action when spring arrives. Knowing about this natural cycle can help you germinate such seed using cold stratification.

This process subjects seed to cool/cold, moist conditions (basically mimicking winter) before or after you plant seed to prime it for germination.

Imitate Mother Nature

So how to mimic this at home? The key points are cool and moist but not waterlogged. You can cold stratify seed before it's planted. This can be done various ways, but my favorite is to buy some perlite (the white stuff in the potting soil you buy at the store that looks a little bit like tiny popcorn).

I put it in a used plastic container and then water it. I get it all damp but then dump out any excess water. Seed will often drown if it sits for a long time submerged in water.

Bitter root (Lewisia Rediviva)



I then get a snack-size Ziploc baggie (or whatever other container suits your fancy), WRITE THE NAME of the seed and the date on the baggie with a Sharpie or similar. I then dump in about a tablespoon or so of perlite, then throw in the seed and put it in the refrigerator (I use the veggie bin). Try not to store fruit, which give out a lot of ethylene gas (such as apples) in the refrigerator during this period, just to be on the safe side, as this gas can do funny things to plants.

I pull out any baggies every week or so and inspect them to see if the seeds have started to germinate (a white root tip sticking out of the seed) – if so, I carefully plant them in a pot like usual and grow some plants. If they haven't, I keep waiting. If I don't know how

long a seed type will take, I use a default time period of eight weeks in the refrigerator, then I plant them, ready or not! (I'm not very patient.)

You can use the great outdoors, too

Another method is to plant the seeds in pots filled with potting soil, water them, and then stick them outside on the north side of your house to enjoy the winter weather. Keep the pots damp, critters out, and your eyes peeled in spring and summer when they should start to germinate.

Whatever the method, expect the occasional fail – some seed can require multiple winters to spring into action. Reduce the odds of failure

by trying several different native wildflower types at once; a few may not germinate but others will.

Many native plants are hard to find for sale as plants – simple cold stratification techniques provide a fun way to increase your plant choices.

For more information on cold stratification and regionally native plants, see the booklet "Plants with Altitude". Free downloads from UW Extension are available by going to www.uwyo.edu/uwe and clicking "Publications" on the left-hand side, enter "B-1255" and follow the prompts.

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