

Christmas is over, New Year's too, and never mind that it's currently 28 degrees and we've got a thick blanket of snow on the ground. The seed catalogs have started arriving and it's time to garden! Yes, NOW!

It's called winter sowing and I've done it for many years with good results. All you need are the right seeds, some translucent plastic gallon-sized milk jugs, seed starting soil and some duct tape.

When I say the right seeds, I mean anything that self-seeds naturally or seeds that require stratification or scarification. Those "s" words sound important and they are when it comes to seed germination. Some kinds of seeds need help in order for them to break free of their hard seed coats and start growing.

There are a couple of ways to do this. Scarification means to break, cut, or soften the hard outer covering on a seed so that moisture can penetrate and help it to germinate. An example of a seed that requires scarification is nasturtium. Soaking the seed in water for several hours prior to planting softens it and helps get things started.

Many of these seeds have help breaking through their seed coats by a process known as stratification. This is the freeze and thaw cycle that occurs during winter here in the north. Just as a terra cotta pot will crack and break if left exposed outside all winter, so will certain seeds and this is just what they need. This is why planting seeds in winter isn't such a crazy idea!

If you know where you want to plant your seeds directly in the garden, you can sprinkle them there any time now. But winter wind, snow, and rain can sometimes cause those seeds to be moved from the location where you want them before spring gets here. So, we plant them in milk jugs, which actually act like little greenhouses.

Here's what you do: Poke holes in the bottom of the milk jugs for drainage. I use an ice pick but an electric drill works, too. Then about three inches up from the bottom, make a horizontal cut

all the way around the milk jug, leaving a hinge on one corner so that the top remains attached to the bottom. Fill the bottom with seed starting potting mix and wet it down. You don't really want to use garden soil for the same reason it's not recommended for container plantings – it doesn't drain well.

Next, sprinkle your seeds over the top, and cover with a thin layer of dry potting mix if seeds are supposed to be sown at any depth. Some seeds require light to germinate, so follow the guidelines on the seed packet to determine this. Then duct tape the carton all the way around where you've cut it, and be sure to take the lid off. Mark the container in some way so you know what you planted, remembering that the sun can cause ink to fade.

Set your cartons outside in a mostly sunny location and wait patiently for the day when you peek down into them and see little green seedlings! Depending on what you planted, they won't all start growing at the same time, so as spring approaches, keep checking on them. Later, you'll be transplanting them to your garden.

You can read more details about this easy way to get a head start on the gardening season with seeds at [www.wintersown.org](http://www.wintersown.org).

There's a long list of seeds that work well for winter sowing that you can choose from. It's really easy to do and can be a fun winter activity to do with kids, too!

Read more at Kylee's blog, Our Little Acre, at [www.ourlittleacre.com](http://www.ourlittleacre.com) and on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre](http://www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre). Contact her at [PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com](mailto:PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com).