

The Joys of Growing From Seed

I confess! I never go anywhere without lots of brown envelopes and a pen! And my year truly begins when the seed catalogues arrive.

Collecting seed is a passion, but when your profession is horticulture, growing from seed is not always the quickest way of producing a point of sale plant but it is certainly the most rewarding and interesting. Of course, seed companies provide information regarding sowing and any special treatment such as maceration, vernalisation, sowing times, and even (in one case) degree of growing difficulty, but there is no guarantee, and certain seeds can be real prima donnas and refuse, like supermodel Linda Evangelista, to 'wake up for less than \$10.000'!

Digitalis, for instance, like to be cold, and do not respond to bottom heat in propagators or gentle heat in the greenhouse. I've always found that keeping the temperature just above freezing, then making them take their chances for further development in the cold greenhouse once the true leaves have appeared stimulates quick growth. As soon as they are pricked out into liners, out they go into the cold frame. The purpurea (biennial) types grow amazingly quickly but even a little bit of cossetting makes them go on strike.

This is not to say that I don't enjoy other means of propagation. Slicing your spade through a clump of geums or geraniums is very satisfying, but it is so enjoyable to, for example, go for a walk in an arboretum, pick up some ripe rowan seeds off the ground, then take them home (with a note of which variety they are), clean off the pulp and sow them. Two years later, you have a tiny sapling which you can

plant out. I first experienced this joy when I was four and planted an acorn. When I left home twenty years later, the neighbour was complaining about how the resulting tree cast too much shade on his greenhouse!

There is no denying that growing from seed is a challenge. It involves getting the compost right (I like a very light textured proprietary seed and cutting compost. Never John Innes, which I find is too heavy for many of the varieties I sow). Then comes the decision to use a seed tray or a modular tray, depending often on seed size and required root development. I love the little gadgets, like the compost tamper and the seed sower with its little pipette attachment. This Christmas a friend gave me a tiny wooden compost tamper for modular trays which sent me into transports of delight!

Sowing different varieties of the same species is another challenge: when it comes to germination and growth speed it's a case of 'vive la difference'!

Echiums (one of my best sellers) are a case in point: they are notoriously particular at the beginning. I sow them in my lightest seed compost in August and keep the trays fairly dry. E. pininana, E. 'Red Rocket' and E. 'Pink Fountain' germinate quite quickly, and are potted on in 9cm liners by early October. E. wildpretii, however require a slightly heavier compost, sulk for a bit longer and require more patience. By November, they are all transplanted into 1.5 litre pots which is how they



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will stay as they dislike root disturbance. As I write this, in January, they are lined up in one of the small greenhouses, with only minimum heating on frosty nights. I will be hardening them off next month, so that when they appear on my sale tables they will be fully hardy and a good size, ready to put on immediate quick growth in someone's garden.

Then you have the frustrating factor of 'what works one year completely fails to co-operate the following year'. This year, both my trays of **Salvia glutinosa (1)** have failed completely in spite of being sown very ripe and fresh and given



identical conditions to previous years. Why?!

Part and parcel of growing from seed is recognising and dealing promptly with the various 'varmint' that love to munch and chew. Field mice who creep into the greenhouse on cold nights and dig out the actual seeds in the compost; tiny snails which neatly nip off the tender growing stems of a whole tray of Newfoundland Lupins then burrow cosily back into the soil where they are invisible. After collecting agastache seed, I turned my back for five minutes to fetch some seed trays only to find that waiting blue tits and wrens had munched the lot! My fault for leaving the greenhouse door always a little bit ajar for them because wrens in particular love to hop from pot to pot in search of aphids and bugs.

Why, for instance, does *Digitalis* 'Redskin' always get greenfly when none of the other varieties do? This

is where the wrens come in useful!

It doesn't matter how carefully you de-bug and wash down with Jeyes fluid before getting started, the enemy will always find a way to invade!

All this pales into insignificance, however, when you put it against the satisfaction of selling a 1.5 litre pot of something that started life no bigger than a speck of dust!

Growing from seed enables me to give people the chance to buy something out of the ordinary. Among my new treasures this year will be:

Digitalis monstrosa with its large dramatic 'top knot' flower.

***Linaria triornithophora* (2)** or 'Three Birds Flying' whose flowers look like budgerigars.

Daucus carota 'Black Knight' with its large, grey/pink cow parsley flowers.

Aquilegia 'Chocolate Soldier' with its unusual chocolate petals and gold stamens.

Rudbeckia hirta 'Cappuccino' with its various shades of pale coffee coloured flowers.

Come and check them out!



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