

Seeds in the Wind

By Julie Silva

Most people accept forsythia's yellow blooms as the first sign of spring. Here is another more prevalent sign: meadow grass, or *Poa annua*. The *Poa annua* has bright green blades of grass that will be in lawns, gardens, and open spaces.

Poa annua has several unique features. Not only is it a short-lived weed but it is a furious seed producer. When *Poa annua* is arriving on scene it is a good sign that the time has come for you to be starting your seeds indoors. Growing your own plants from seed gives you a wider choice of varieties, strong plants, control over planting dates and less money out of pocket.

Seed germination is the salvation for gardeners following a long winter. Cabin fever is a problem for many, many gardeners. After being locked indoors all winter, seed starting gives us all a jump on spring and spring planting. Just as any part of Mother Nature's plan, there are rules to follow, all with good reason.

The chosen seeds should create plants that thrive in your area. Always start with clean materials. Soil from your garden is filled with problem pests like bacteria, molds, and fungus. Pots should be washed in a 10% bleach and water solution. Seeds do have a shelf life, especially if they are not stored in a cool place. This is where we start: good soil, good seeds, and clean containers.

As with many things there is a rule of thumb for planting seeds. The rule is not to plant any deeper than three times the width of the seed. Rules are meant to be broken, though, and many seeds will not fit this box. Your best advice comes from the back of the seed packet. The seed packet will give clear instructions on planting times, locations, seed depth, and spacing.

How do you get started? To be successful you will need a starting soil, containers and a way to keep the temperature constant during germination, moisture, and light. Depending on the type of seed, the requirements will vary.

Your medium should be sterile. There are soils just for seed starting, or use a clean, new potting soil. Pre-moisten the soil and fill your containers. The containers may be trays or growing trays with individual cells. You do not want the containers to be too large, it is better to move your plants up as the roots develop and fill the pot. Your plants will prefer a soil mixture that has 50% soil, 25% air space for oxygen, and 25% moisture. The soil should drain but maintain moisture.

The temperature for germination is 70 to 75 degrees. Check your seed packet for complete information. If you are using florescent lights close to the soil, they will warm the soil enough for germination. Usually 3 to 4 inches away from the soil is best to start. Some people use the top of the refrigerator, window sills, or heating mats. Some seeds need cool temperatures so those seeds will germinate in your unheated garage or enclosed porch.

Seeds need moisture to germinate. Humidity and moisture must be controlled; too much water will rot the seed, too little water, the seed will refuse to germinate. The soil must be kept evenly moist but not soaking wet.

Light is equally as important as all the other variables. Knowing what the requirements are for your individual type of seed will create a successful germination. After the seeds have germinated, they need sufficient light to grow strong. Florescent lights are best for the demands of seedlings. Plants do need time with the lights off to rest. After germination occurs your lights should be on 12 to 14 hours a day. As the plants mature you will continue to move the lights upward.

The last process before transplanting your seedlings into the garden is to harden them off by giving them time outdoors. Hardening off takes the baby plant and introduces it to the outside elements by acclimating it to temperatures, sunlight, and wind. Start slowly in the shade or light morning sun and gradually add more sunlight. Be mindful of pests that might want to enjoy a meal on those tender shoots, pest like earwigs, slugs, and snails.

Starting plants from seeds will give gardens a wider variety of plants and genetics. Just as with any relationship with Mother Nature, patience is the first rule, followed by optimism. The same optimism that spreads poa annua everywhere!

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