

In Your Garden

Seed Sowing and Propagation

By Robert Blake

February 2018

The Gardeners' Club enjoyed a very practical talk by Chris Bird, a lecturer from Sparsholt College on how to sow seeds and propagate plants. He started by explaining that all seed manufacturers must meet a minimum germination percentage defined in the 1948 Agricultural Act. Seed packets are marked with a 'sow by date'. If you are buying vegetable seeds for your own consumption, be aware that those labelled F1 hybrids are all genetically identical so will reach maturity at the same time. If you have trouble handling small seeds and getting an even distribution, then seed tapes, containing pre-spaced seeds, are an ideal option.

Large seeds are easy to handle and can be sown in seed trays or individually in pots. Some varieties of sweet pea seeds are hard coated and can be placed in a bowl of boiling water and left for 24 hours before sowing. Alternatively use a sharp knife to nick the outer shell or rub gently with sandpaper on the opposite side to the seed's black 'eye' or scar, which will improve the germination rate from 40% to nearer 90%.

Medium sized seeds can be sown in Jiffy 7 pellets which contain a well-balanced starter fertiliser and avoid root disturbance, resulting in better plant survival. Hand sowing in a seed tray can be done by placing the seeds in the palm of the hand, gently tapping the base of the hand to line them up and then continuing to tap as you zig zag up and down the tray in two directions to ensure even coverage. Very fine seed should be mixed 50:50 with dry silver sand so that you can see where you have sown it. Don't forget to label each tray! Pot up the seedlings as soon as you can handle them by a leaf but not the delicate stem. A basic rule of thumb is that they are ready to plant out in the garden when there are 'six true leaves'.

Plants can be propagated using softwood cuttings. Choose a shoot with a strong healthy-looking tip and cut it just **above** a leaf joint (node) so that it is at least 10-13cm long. Trim the base of the cutting to just **below** the first leaf joint and reduce the top so that it is about 8-10cm long. Finally remove the leaves from the bottom third of the cutting, by pulling them gently downwards, before placing it in the compost. It is from these small wounds that the roots will emerge.

Hardwood cuttings can also be taken in late autumn and early winter. They should be about the thickness of a pencil and removed in the same way as a softwood cutting. Trim the base to just **below** the first node and reduce the length to about 15cm by cutting off the top at an angle so that you know which way up to plant it. Bury it in a trench with only a third above the soil and leave for a year, making sure that it never dries out.

A very good reference book for beginners is 'Propagation Basics' by Steven Bradley, published by Hamlyn in 2002. It is out of print but you can pick up good second-hand copies on Amazon from 1p to £4.