



# raising seedlings

START YOUR OWN VEGETABLE + HERB  
SEEDLINGS



Hello.  
I'm Bec

I am the urban hillbilly behind Growing Home. For almost 10 years I have been growing my own food, raising chickens + bees, cooking from the garden, and preserving the harvest.

I love raising my own seedlings, nurturing them from seed to seedling, ready to transplant into the garden. Let me show you how you can do it too!



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You can also find mini eGuides on  
Seed Saving, Natural Pest and  
Disease Solutions, Wicking Garden  
Beds and Healthy Soil.

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# GETTING STARTED

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Planting seedlings can give you a head start, compared to sowing seed which can take several weeks to get to the same stage. It may also offer more certain results compared to sowing seed direct in the garden, as the initial growing phase can occur in a controlled setting.

Starting seedlings inside, on your back patio, in a greenhouse or a mini greenhouse means less risk of pests or poor weather condition ruining your emerging seedlings.

You may decide to start raising your own seedlings in punnets, pots or trays, to then be transplanted into garden beds once they have grown big enough. Doing this can

- Save you money - a packet of seed, pots and seed raising mix can cost less and produce more (saving your own seed, reusing pots and making your own seed raising mix can save you even more)
- Increase the range of vegetables and herbs available for you to grow, including being able to buy or source heirloom seed
- Reduce negative impact that can be associated with packaging, distribution and production of conventional seedlings
- Give you an opportunity to barter, swap, sell or give away your excess seedlings

The challenges in raising your own seedlings can be that

- It does take more time compared to buying seedlings. Not only the time to actually pot up the seeds, but then also waiting weeks for them to grow big enough to transplant
- You need the right position for them to thrive, and avoid becoming spindly or weak
- There may be poor germination rates
- You may need to prevent pest issues

There are solutions to many of the challenges or issues we may face when raising seedlings.

## WHAT TO RAISE

What you want to grow, and therefore the seedlings you plan to raise, may be based around what is suitable for

- the space you have
- the climate or zone you are in
- what season it is
- what you eat
- difficulty level

If you cater for more than you think you need, it allows for any issues which may reduce the amount of healthy seedlings you end up with. You can always sell or give them away if you do end up with an oversupply.

Don't forget that some varieties can only succeed when sown directly as they don't handle transplanting. One option can be to try raising these varieties in [plantable pots](#), which means the roots are disturbed less when you transplant them.

## GETTING STARTED

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# RAISING ESSENTIALS

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## TOOLS

- Hand trowel (or use a small pot, to scoop up seed raising mix into the containers)
- Dibber (makes a small hole for seed, or use your finger, or the end of a pen)
- Gardening gloves
- Watering can with fine nozzle or a spray bottle
- Labelling options ([see next](#))

## SEED RAISING MIX

Seed raising mix is a fine blend of materials that encourage the germination of seeds, and supports the growth of the seedlings. It needs to retain moisture, but not become saturated or compacted. It needs to be light and airy, so roots can grow and breathe easily.

It needs some nutrition, but not so much that it overwhelms the seedling. You may be happy to buy bags of seed raising mix, or you may want to make your own mix.

If you are going to buy it, remember that seed raising mix is not the same thing as potting mix (which is much coarser). Most seed raising mixes include a chemical fertiliser or wetting agent, though it may be possible to source 'organic' seed raising mix.

There are various recipes out there that usually include compost, coir or coco peat, worm casting, sand and aged manure.

## LABELLING YOUR SEEDLINGS

Labelling your seedling pots with the variety that you have planted means that you can identify what you are growing (don't rely on remembering it!)

Adding the date means you can keep an eye on the success of germination. If the seed hasn't germinated within the expected timeframe, time to problem solve and consider planting more seed! Some people also use garden journals to record potting up dates, and monitor when their seedlings should be emerging.

You can use a variety of options to label, such as plastic or metal markers.

- plastic labels you can buy
- make from recycled plastic containers cut up plastic containers, like ice cream containers and lids, or milk cartons
- wooden 'paddle pop' sticks but these can become illegible after being wet each day
- slate, metal or 'blackboard' type labels, which are supposed to be reusable but I often find the white chalk or wax pen doesn't clean off easily

These can then be used when you transplant the seedling out. You can write on these with permanent marker, or a removeable option.

You can also write directly on plastic pots using a liquid chalk pen. After you have transplanted your seedlings, it can be removed from your reusable pots/ trays by rubbing and washing them off.

## RAISING ESSENTIALS

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You might like to test that the chalk pen won't come off when wet, such as when you are watering the pots. I use a liquid chalk marker (Uni brand) which comes off with a good rubbing and wash, but not when the pots are watered each day.

If you are using this option, you won't have labels to put into the garden bed when you transplant, but you can create a 'garden map' instead. Learn more in the [Grow eGuide!](#)

## SEED

There are different types of seed from which you can raise your seedlings.

- **Hybrid seeds** (i.e. F1) which are a cross between 2 plants to get the 'best' from both, such as higher yield or disease resistance. Note: if you save seed from the plants you grow, the seed can be sterile or highly variable if they do germinate in the next generation. You need to buy this seed again each time you want to plant it.
- **Open Pollinated** – when pollination occurs naturally, not manipulated; they may be more genetically diverse; may be adapted to local conditions, and resulting seeds will produce plants roughly identical to their parents. You can save seed from the plants you grow using this seed.
- **Heirloom or Heritage** – genetically strong open pollinated seed that have been around for a long time. A wide range of more unusual colours, shapes, textures, flavours and growing habits.
- **Organic** – grown and processed without toxic chemicals

## RAISING ESSENTIALS

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Some options to find suitable seed to raise your seedlings from

- Look for seed swapping groups or Seed Savers Networks in your area who may have excess they will happily give away or barter with
- Barter with your neighbours, family or friends
- Buy seeds (from an online company or perhaps a local nursery)

In Australia, seed companies that I have used and recommend:

- [The Lost Seed](#)
- [Green Harvest](#)
- [Herb Cottage](#) (seed and herb seedlings)
- [Southern Harvest](#)

(Remember that there may be quarantine restrictions for some interstate posting of seeds).

You can find a list of other seed companies (or contribute to it) in [The Growing Home Community](#), a free group hosted on Facebook.

To learn more about saving your own seed to raise, check out the [Seed Saving mini eGuide](#).



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# RAISING ESSENTIALS

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# WHERE TO RAISE

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For seeds to germinate and seedlings to grow well, they need the right amount of warmth, moisture, light and oxygen.

They will need a location that receives as much sunlight hours as possible and has fairly consistent warm temperatures. In the Southern Hemisphere, this might be a north facing kitchen, bathroom or laundry window, or in a protected spot on a patio. A place that

- Has ventilation but away from cold breezes or strong winds
- Where you can easily keep an eye on them, but they won't be in the road (they need to stay there for several weeks)
- Won't be affected by any water leaks, like on a dining table
- Is away from intense temperature fluctuations, or hot direct sunlight

If you do not have the right conditions, think about how you can manipulate them by using a [mini greenhouse](#), or artificial lighting and heat. It may be a worthwhile investment to buy a grow light system, or make your own using fluorescent light bulbs. You could consider electric heat mats or pads, that the seed trays sit on to boost warmth required for germination and growth.

Another option might be finding someone local to you with a greenhouse with some space to put your seedlings too.

## MINI GREENHOUSE

A greenhouse lets in sunlight, and keeps the moisture and warmth in to help germinate seeds and grow healthy seedlings.

Whether you buy or make one, make sure it is

- Clear enough to let sunlight in (to avoid spindly seedlings)
- Ability to open a vent or zipper for ventilation (to avoid overheating)
- Portable and easy to move when it comes time to harden off seedlings

You can buy mini greenhouse 'propagator' boxes, which include a hard plastic cover (with vent) and base, inside which fits a seed tray.

You can [make your own garden cloches](#), or try using the plastic covers from sheet sets/ quilts you've bought, in which small pots or a seedling tray can fit and enough height for seedlings to grow. The soft plastic may soften and flop in the sun, so add structure like wire coat hangers, chop sticks or dowel.

You could also use large clear plastic storage boxes with lids, either with the pots in them, or seed raising mix directly in the bottom. Either drill holes in the bottom of the box for drainage, or do not overwater! These often have wheels making them easier to move.

You can buy various styles of mid-sized greenhouses which have 3 or 4 tiers (layers of shelving) that you secure to an outside wall or fence. These have plastic covers with zips, that can be opened during the day when it comes time to harden seedlings up.

## WHERE TO RAISE

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# WHAT TO RAISE IN

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There are many types of containers or set ups, that you can use to raise the seeds, for transplanting. You do not have to buy new or expensive gear, you may be able to reuse pots or items you have, or buy second hand, from a tip shop or buy/ swap/ sell group. Wash with hot soapy water, rinse well and dry in the sun.

## SEED TRAYS/ PUNNETS

### WHAT IS IT?

Punnets (AKA flats) are trays with multiple shallow molded plastic sections or 'cells'.

Seed trays refers to trays with only one large section that fit multiple seedlings in them without a wall or barrier between them.

### BENEFITS

- Drainage holes in the bottom already
- Space efficient
- Reusable
- Stackable for storing
- You can write a label directly on them with a chalk pen

### CHALLENGES

Cost to buy new; sometimes tricky to get the seedlings out of punnet trays

### CONSIDERATIONS

You can buy punnets with just a few sections (6 to 8) or with many sections; you may buy these trays/ punnets with clear covers that fit over to make mini greenhouses

## PLASTIC POTS

### WHAT IS IT?

Small plastic containers with drainage holes in the bottom. You may keep and use pots that previously purchased seedlings have come in. You can also get seedling trays to hold multiple pots.

### BENEFITS

- Reusable
- Stackable for storing
- Can get decent amount of seed raising mix and water into them
- Drainage holes already in the bottom
- You can write a label directly on them with a chalk pen

### CHALLENGES

Cost to buy new; some people may not like growing in plastic

### CONSIDERATIONS

- You may want small sized pots (55mm, like forestry tubes, or round mini pots), which take less seed raising mix and space, but can be limited by the seedlings outgrowing them.
- You might consider larger pots (100 to 200mm) which require more seed raising mix, but this gives the seedling the chance to grow and not run out of space and nutrients before it is time to transplant. This may be the case if you live in a area where you must wait for frosts to pass before you can plant out your warm season seedlings.

## WHAT TO RAISE IN

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## PLANTABLE POTS

### WHAT IS IT?

Pots that can be planted into the garden bed with the seedling, to reduce 'transplant shock' (by not disturbing the roots, and by slowly integrating to the garden bed as the pot breaks down). These may include

- Peat pots or coir pots
- Coco pellets
- Soil blocks
- Newspaper/ origami pots
- Egg shells and egg cartons
- Toilet paper tubes (inner cardboard roll)

### BENEFITS

- Less transplant shock
- No need to store between seasons

### CHALLENGES

- Not reusable
- Some options may dry out quickly
- Some options may not provide a lot of support
- Cost for buying jiffy/ coir pots
- Smaller size means seedlings may outgrow them before the timing is right to transplant

### CONSIDERATIONS

Look into a wooden 'Pot Maker' to roll your own newspaper pots.

## WHAT TO RAISE IN

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## OTHER POTS/ OPTIONS

### WHAT IS IT?

Consider recycled and DIY options, like

- Milk cartons (cut in half)
- Yoghurt containers
- Take away disposable coffee cups or plastic drink cups
- Containers that came with their own lid, like 'clamshell' style plastic containers you buy sprouts, salads or baked goods in

### BENEFITS

Include affordable, eco-friendly, accessible

### CHALLENGES

- Not reusable
- Some options may dry out quickly
- Most options will require drainage holes put into the bottom (as simple as poke with a metal skewer or sharp nail, or perhaps using a drill)
- Smaller size means seedlings may outgrow them before the timing is right to transplant

### CONSIDERATIONS

These are a great way to share your excess seedlings because you do not have to give away your reusable plastic pots that you want to use for the next season, or rely that people will return them to you.

This can be a good way to get kids involved in fundraising by selling seedlings at a school fete, market or fair.

## WHAT TO RAISE IN

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# POTTING UP SEED

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Some seeds need special handling, like soaking for several hours to remove a chemical coating, or scarification, which is 'roughing up' or breaking the coating before planting. This is to bring them out of dormancy, and induce germination. This information should be available on the packet, or do some research if you have saved your own seed.

## *step one*

Line up all your pots (use a seedling tray or a shallow box to hold any small, tall pots upright) and fill with seed raising mix to almost full.

## *step two*

Make labels (or write on the pots with chalk pen) for the number of pots you are allocating for that type of vege or herb seed.

### *step three*

Make a small hole for each seed (with your finger/ pen) to the depth required and place one seeds per hole hole.

### *step four*

Cover up with more seed raising mix and put a label in (or write on with chalk pen) and repeat for the other varieties/ type of seeds.

### *step five*

Locate in a sunny spot, with consistent warm temperatures, then gently spray or water each day or every second day, until the soil is moistened, not saturated.

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# PROTECT YOUR SEEDLINGS

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## LOCATION

Find a location for your seedlings can be tricky. The right amount of sunlight and warmth are important, but we also need to be mindful of protecting them from strong winds that could knock pots over, a mini greenhouse or a pot stand over, or blow things onto your seedlings.

Wild birds, pets, insects and curious children may want to wreak havoc on your emerging seedlings. Think about how to keep your seedlings safe, by putting them in a secure place, up higher if necessary, and/or covering them.

## MONITORING + MANUAL REMOVAL

Sadly sometimes you don't know you have a pest problem until you find your seedlings all nibbled to basically nothing! If you do notice holes appearing in some leaves, or the odd seedling destroyed, check under and around your pots or trays of seedlings.

Remove any naughty pests you find and take action to prevent more attacking, including removing any potential homes for them (stacked pots etc) and try the following methods.

## COVER

Consider covering the seedling pot/ tray with clear plastic or a cover to make a [mini greenhouse](#). This lets in light, keeps in warmth, moisture and helps to keep out pests and pets.

Over many years I have found using garden cloches is one of the best methods to prevent pests attacking seedlings. Make your own from recycled plastic juice bottles cut in half to make two cloches. Carefully push the cloche into the soil over the seed/ seedling inside the pot, or placed over top of the pot.

## IRON EDTA BASED PELLETS

Another reliable method I have found to keep slugs and snails away from seedlings is using iron based, pet-friendly pellets on top of the seedling pot, or around the edges of trays.

## PHYSICAL BARRIERS

You can try creating a barrier that may reduce the activity of pests. Use on top of the soil where you have planted your seed, or around the bottom of the seedling.

- **Diatomaceous earth (DE)** is a natural abrasive rock powder that desiccates pests. It can affect beneficial insects too, so use accordingly. Wear a face mask when applying; use food grade DE.
- **Copper tape** placed around pots, as slugs and snails may react to the electrical charge as their slime connects
- **Egg shells** Rinse, dry and crush up egg shells into very small pieces
- **Other options** include wood ash, sawdust, wood shavings and coffee grinds

# PROTECT YOUR SEEDLINGS

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# ONGOING CARE

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Depending on the variety, the seeds could germinate (start to grow and pop up above the soil) in as little as 2 days, up to 2 or more weeks. Check every day or two, for progress on germination and growth, as well as observing for any issues (see next section on [Troubleshooting](#)).

Keep the soil moistened, but not saturated, watering to the base/ roots area, rather than all over the leaves. You may also consider researching 'bottom up' watering.

To start with the seedlings will have rounded 'seed leaves' (cotyledon) which help feed and nourish the plant, but shrivel once the 'true leaves' come in. When this happens, you can start to use a diluted liquid fertiliser (such as worm tea/ juice) once a week.

If you put several seeds into each pot or seed tray you may need to thin or 'prick out' any seedlings that are growing too close to each other. This crowding may inhibit quality growth as they compete for nutrients, water and sunlight. Once their true leaves have started to form, look for the strong seedlings and remove some of the weaker ones. This can be awful to do as you don't to throw out your little seedlings! You may be able to repot these and some will manage to grow (in which case you might prick out the strongest to try repotting, which may handle transplanting better).

## GETTING READY TO TRANSPLANT

It may take several weeks from potting up the seeds to germination, to then reach the size when the seedling can be transplanted. Before planting out they should have at least 3 to 4 'true leaves'.

Before transplanting seedlings, also think about if the weather conditions will be optimal outside. Be mindful of weather forecasts, especially in areas that get late frosts in Spring, before planting out your warm season, frost sensitive seedlings.

You may also need to consider when you will have space, if you still have crops from the previous season in the garden beds. You can learn more about transitioning between seasons here in the [Grow eGuide](#) (available in the Growing Home shop).

If the seedlings are outgrowing their pots but it isn't the best time to plant them out, consider repotting them into bigger pots.

They may need a 'hardening off' period to acclimatise the seedling, before then planting out when the weather reaches the right conditions for the seedling to thrive. This means taking them outside and removing the mini greenhouse covers during the day, and replacing or moving back inside at night, for several days.

Incrementally increase the time spent outdoors and exposed over several days before finally transplanting. You may also use [cloches](#) once the seedlings are in the garden bed, to help them acclimatise.

## ONGOING CARE

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**Is the soil temperature correct?** Some seeds can handle cooler soil temperatures, but others must be kept warm for germination to occur.

**Have you been lightly watering the seeds/ soil in the pots?** Consistent watering is an important aspect of germinating seed. Most seed need to be kept moist for germination to occur, but of course, overwatering and saturated seed can lead to rotting.

**Are they warm and sunny enough, but not too hot?** Keep pots inside in a sunny ventilated room, or outside in a mini/ proper greenhouse.

**What soil did you use?** Seeds do better with loose, friable, lightly fertilised seed raising mix in pots. If you used compacted soil, it may be hard for the seed to push up through the soil.

**Did they germinate but get eaten by pests?** Some pests will completely eat a seedling and you may not even see they had germinated, but were then annihilated. See more information on how to [protect your seedlings](#).

## TROUBLESHOOTING

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# TROUBLE SHOOTING

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## **SEEDLINGS ARE WEAK, STUNTED OR JUST PLAIN SAD**

**Have you been lightly watering the seeds/pots?** Check the moisture level in the soil (poke your little finger in the soil or use a moisture testing tool), and give a light watering with a spray bottle for seedlings or a watering can for young plants, until the soil is damp.

**Are they warm and sunny enough, but not too hot?** Make sure the seedlings are getting adequate sunlight and warmth where they are located. Try a different location, or consider setting up a DIY mini greenhouse to keep moisture and warmth in.

**Are you giving them any feed?** Consider trying an organic fertiliser. After the true leaves appear, you can start to give a diluted organic fertiliser once a week. For more established plants that have pale leaves or stunted growth, they may need to be fertilised.

**What soil were they potted up in?** Think about what soil the seeds were potted up in. Even if you use seed raising mix, the soil in pots can become depleted of nutrients and compacted, sometimes requiring repotting or feeding.

## SEEDLINGS ARE SPINDLY/ LEGGY

This can happen from lack of decent sunlight or they may be too close together, competing for sunlight and nutrients, and need thinning. Or it can be a sign of being too warm or overfeeding, causing rapid growth spurts. Make sure they have consistent moisture too.

## SEEDLINGS ARE DROOPY

This could be caused by lack of water, too warm, or possibly wilt (a fungal disease, where the leaves droop but also become brown and crispy, or discoloured).

## PESTS, DISEASES + WEEDS

**Are there any marks, bug holes or signs of pests?** Check under the leaves for mites, aphids, eggs or larvae but also check around the edges or bottom of pots and garden beds for snails/ slugs/ other. Find a Bug Identification resource for your area and learn about good and bad bugs.

**Is there any discolouration or marks on the leaves or stems? Any leaf drop?** This could indicate a viral, fungal or bacterial disease, or even nematodes. Consider soil mineral deficiencies too.

**Are there any weeds competing for the nutrients?** Pull weeds up and add mulch to prevent them growing back.

# TROUBLESHOOTING

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*find yourself in the dirt*



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