



November 18, 2022

How and When to Sow Native Seeds

Mar '23 UPDATE: We recently attended a [presentation](#) by Dolly Foster on winter sowing in containers instead of the direct sowing we talk about below. Either method will produce results, but using containers may give more control over seedlings and make them easier to identify vs weeds. Works for garden veggies too. See [The Gardener's Guide to Prairie Plants](#) for seedling ID photos!

Shortest answers:

How? Sprinkle seeds directly on **soil**.

When? In central Indiana, October-ish through the end of January for best germination.

But we know you have more questions than that :)

First, what to choose?

You need to know what conditions the species likes- how much sun do they require? How much soil moisture? Often species we carry will be tolerant of many soil types (part clay, loamy (loose and organic), or sandy/rocky or some range of these. If they need a specific type we will have it noted in the listing. If it isn't otherwise highlighted, general part clay Indiana soils will do.

Use our listings and/or the [“Growing Requirements” pdf](#) on our website to choose species that are compatible with the areas you have to plant. Seeds from us will also include basic sowing instructions either inside or printed on the packet.

Prepare the soil.

If you need to prepare an entirely new bed, it can still be done in the winter! You can peel up sod, spray, pull, or dig herbaceous plants. The internet is full of suggestions about how to accomplish this. Choose which methods seem best for you, and your space.

For sod, we've found the by far the easiest way to clear it is to spray a foliar herbicide instead of pulling up sod. This reduces time and labor input, keeps any existing top soil in place, and the dead grass stems and roots help keep seeds from washing away! Just mind which herbicide you're using, as different kinds take different amounts of time for the soil to be safe for new plants.

Spraying plants or cutting and painting stumps with herbicide is best done in spring and summer, when sap is flowing freely. While it should always be used conservatively, herbicide is a viable way to clear areas that would otherwise be untenable. Particularly with vigorous invasive plants like winter creeper, fire bush, and bush honeysuckle, always cut and paint or they'll grow right back. Again, different kinds of herbicide require different amounts of time for the soil to become safe again for planting- do your research!

The smothering method, covering existing grass or plants with cardboard boxes (tape and stickers removed) and topped with mulch, is also best done a full warm season in advance, e.g. April to October, before seed sowing, to give the boxes time to decompose. This ensures new plants can put down roots in the soil below the boxes.

If you have an existing bed, just find some bare spots between other plants! Native plants don't mind getting cozy! If you like, cover lightly with some garden bracken like old leaves, stems and bits from your other plants.

Honestly, you don't need to do a lot. Once the ground is prepared, just sprinkle and wait. Fall and winter sowing are great because they require no more work on your part until spring! You don't need to water, or weed until spring! When seeds sprout, only weed for dandelions and species you can identify. Young plants can be hard to ID, any you don't want to pull your seedlings! If you're not sure, **be patient**. Time will tell. Extended dry spells in the spring and summer will likely require watering, but plants grown by seed are often more tolerant of short dry periods than transplants. Keep an eye on them, and you'll learn how often you'll need to water in your conditions!

Remember- these are native plants.

They aren't domesticated, and only need scattering in a likely spot to do their thing. Think about how seeds are spread in nature. They can be dispersed by wind, water (we don't carry any seeds of this sort), or moved around by animals, both intentionally and unintentionally. In most cases, seeds aren't buried deep, but usually alight on a bare bit of ground or get washed down through other plants and debris by rain. To mimic this, we sow directly onto bare ground. If you're concerned about erosion, use a *sprinkling* of mulch or straw to help hold them in place. Add your seeds, then press that lightly into the soil (put down a large, collapsed box and walk on top of it to spread out your weight). Mulched leaves can be good for this, but not too many. *Avoid creating a mat above the soil.* Seeds need to be able reach the soil, and new shoots need to be able to push through in the spring.

Header Photo: NPU HQ Parkway Planting From Sowing to Maturity. 2019-2022.