

Easy Seed Starting Using Recycled Containers



By Lindsay del Carlo, Trial Garden Manager

You don't need to have a fancy set up to successfully grow your garden seedlings. Many people have that one cabinet or drawer full of plastic containers that have lost their lids, a stack of yogurt cups that have long been forgotten or the clear plastic "clamshell" containers that you've kept around, and maybe an empty plastic milk jug or two. Disposable containers can receive new life by using them to start seeds.

Food and yogurt containers or milk jugs with their bottoms cut off will need to have drainage holes. Use a drill with a ¼ inch bit to put holes in the bottom of the containers every few inches. Clamshell containers of store bought produce often already have holes in them, so this makes them very convenient for sowing seeds. These also have a lid that can be closed to hold in moisture when weather is warm.



Milk jug bottoms make good starting trays; Drill small drainage holes every few inches. Clamshell containers usually have drainage holes and a lid to hold in moisture.

Containers that are about no more than 3 inches deep are perfect for seed varieties that will be sown close together and then transplanted. I am using these to grow tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, basil and spring flowers like calendula, bachelor buttons, *Agrostemma*, and *Clarkia*. This will insure that I'm able to scoop up all of the roots with minimal damage when transplanting. Small yogurt cups work perfectly as individual containers to sow large seed varieties like pumpkin and squash.



Starting Calendula, Pumpkin, Squash and Pepper seeds in disposable containers

You can start lots of seeds in your own back yard even if you don't have a greenhouse. There are many varieties that will germinate just fine outside in a protected location that has morning sun, and partial shade for the rest of the day, especially in hot climates.

Growing seedlings in these conditions is water wise and less stressful for plants. Note: too much shade will cause young stems to stretch out looking for sunlight, and causes seedlings to become very weak.



I have made a special table just for growing seedlings. Sections of ½ inch irrigation tubing have been attached with screws to the sides to create hoops on which to place bird netting, row cover, or shade cloth to protect seedlings.

Note: Long season, heat loving varieties like tomatoes, peppers and eggplants are NOT suitable to start in light shade outdoors. They need a warm place inside in a sunny location like a bright window sill or use a grow light set up to germinate and grow well.

Stay tuned and we will follow up with the next step for these seedlings grown in recycled containers. As soon as they are big enough, I'll show how to transplant seedlings into larger individual containers or directly into the garden bed once they are ready.



We used recycled containers like milk jugs, yogurt cups and plastic clamshells to start seedlings with much success! Spring flowers like Blue Boy Cornflower, Mountain Garland Clarkia and summer vegetables like Raven Zucchini and Cinderella Pumpkins were grown outside in a place with morning sun and afternoon shade. Tomatoes and peppers were put on heat mats in the greenhouse.

Our spring flowers will be transplanted right into the ground when they are a few inches tall and the roots have filled out the container, but before they are very root bound. Since they were grown outdoors, there is no need to harden them off. Just scoop a section with a few plants with all of their roots intact, then separate each one and plant 6-8 inches apart.



The zucchini and pumpkins have grown perfectly in yogurt cups. When the roots completely fill out the cup, they will be transplanted directly into the garden.

Tomato and pepper seedlings all need to be transplanted into larger individual containers when they have several sets of true leaves. Yogurt cups are the perfect size for them.

When the night temperatures are above 50°F (10°C) it will be time to move them outside to harden off, and then plant into the garden.

