

Finally Fall: Prepping Native Seeds

Fall is an ideal time to gather seeds from late season plants.

Now, learn how to prepare those seeds for planting!

Before planting in your garden in the springtime, there are some steps to take to prepare your seeds for planting. Regardless of the size of your planting area, it is always a good idea to map out which plants you want to have in your yard or garden and where to place them (Fig. 1). Then you should collect or purchase your seeds, being sure to keep them organized and sorted by plant type (Fig 2). Some plant seeds don't need much care and can be sowed directly into the ground during the spring, but other native plant seeds need more attention and must go through a process called **cold stratification** and **warm stratification**. The point of stratification is to make the seeds go through a period that mimics the natural seasons. Putting the seeds through a normal temperature cycle of cold and then warm signals to the seed when it is time to germinate.

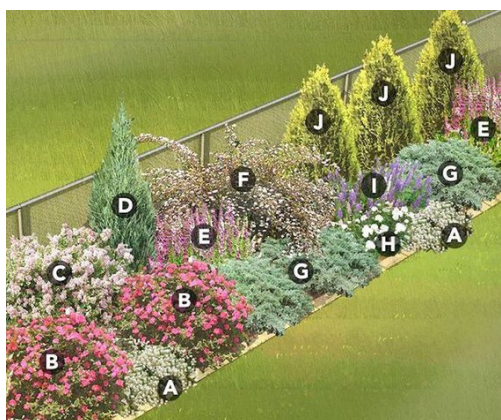


Fig 1. Garden layout. [Source](#).



Fig 2. Sorted seeds. [Source](#).

Cold stratification mimics winter and is completed by placing a damp paper towel in a plastic press-and-seal bag and adding the seeds right on top of the paper towel. If you are doing this, be sure not to close the bag completely (Fig 3). Then bag is placed in the refrigerator or another area of your house that is consistently between about 38°F and 42°F for between a few weeks to several months, depending on the seed. Remember to check your paper towel often to re-moisten if necessary. Be sure to label your bags of seeds with the species, date, length of stratification, and then make a note on your calendar when it is time to take them out. Warm stratification mimics spring and follows the same process, but at a temperature of 68°F to 86°F. This temperature can be accomplished by using a heating mat or waiting for the soil to heat up in the spring. After cold stratification, seeds can either be planted directly in the soil outside during the second or third week of May, or if you want to get a head start, you can fill a flat with soil and the prepared seeds and use a heating mat to get to the soil to the consistently warm temperature that they need to germinate. When starting seeds inside



Fig 3. In the process: stratifying seeds. [Source](#).

it is very important to give them sufficient light. Seeds started inside can be transplanted during the second or third week of May. During this process it is important to check frequently for mold, wipe off seeds that have visual signs of mold growth, and discard seeds that have been heavily affected. Once the seeds have successfully germinated and have started to sprout, then they can be planted in the soil. Be sure to label your bags of seeds with the species, date, length of stratification, and then make a note on your calendar when it is time to take them outside.

Some native plant seeds must also go through the process of **scarification**. This means that you scratch the surface of the seed, with sandpaper for example, so that water can reach the seed to help it germinate (see Fig 4).

Examples of how to prepare native seeds for planting:

Cardinal flower

Seeds can be sowed directly into your loose garden soil, but do not cover seeds. Keep soil moist.



Cardinal flower.



Cardinal flower seeds. [Source](#).

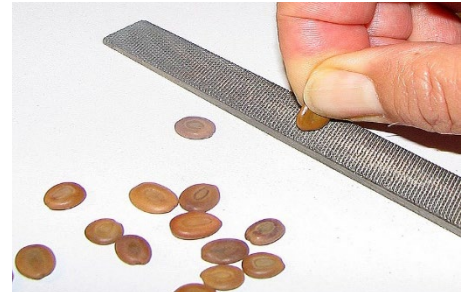


Fig 4. A version of the scarification process.

Aster

Seeds do not require stratification and can be sowed directly in your garden beds or pots in the spring, or you can prep them by putting them through three months of cold stratification and then warm.



New England asters.



New England aster seeds.

Milkweed

Seeds need to go through one month of cold stratification and then warm stratification.



Common milkweed.



Common milkweed seeds.

Goldenrod

Seeds must go through three months of cold stratification and then warm stratification.



Goldenrod.



Goldenrod seeds.

Coneflower

These seeds must go through cold stratification for three months and then warm stratification.



Purple coneflower.



Purple coneflower seeds. [Source.](#)

Hibiscus

These seeds must go through three months of cold stratification, then scarification, and then seeds can be sowed into the soil.



Swamp mallow.



Swamp mallow seeds. [Source](#).

If you don't have access to native seeds, check out the Native Plant Society of New Jersey's website, [here](#), to view native plant nurseries in the state. After you have collected the seeds you wish to plant, use the instructions above, or learn about how to prepare your specific seeds online or from your local NJ native nursery.

Gardening is an experimental process, and everyone has their own tips for growing plants successfully. Test out different options and see which works best for you!

Special thanks to contributing staff Callie Valent, Native Nursery Coordinator and Joanne Vogel, Environmental Educator.