

Growing Annuals from Seed

In its very basic sense, annuals may be grown from seed merely by scattering the seeds on a reasonably well prepared patch of ground at the right time of year (late April, Northern Hemisphere) and waiting for nature. Of course all that can be a bit hit and miss, so these instructions give an idea of how to do this in less of a haphazard manner.

Timing

Mid-Winter to Late Spring – sow the seeds from mid-January onwards, bear in mind the plants will grow inside regardless of whether they can survive outside so make sure you have enough room for your seedlings. Early sowings will produce bigger plants to start off with, but most things catch up given time.

Germination

Sow on the surface of a good quality seed raising mix (the choice here is yours, whatever is available in your location – do not use garden soil, I know the seedlings will eventually go into it, but it is likely full of weed seeds and pathogens that will just love the temperature you need to get your flowers going and will take over). Smaller seeds should stay on the surface; larger seeds may be pressed in or covered with few millimetres of the seed mix. Water well and seal in a bag or place in a propagator. Most seeds will need to be germinated at around 20 Deg C (68 F) but some may require a lower temperature (which will be noted). Germination will take 1 – 3 weeks and the rates will almost certainly not be anywhere near 100% as this is a survival mechanism for plants that have an annual cycle to protect against a crop disaster like drought which could exhaust the natural seed reserve. So expect 66%, if you get more, smile ☺...

Growing on

Generally they require growing on in slightly cooler conditions, but if you keep them warm, just make sure they have lots of light and water so they can make the most of the conditions. When they reach the two leaf pair stage (so seedleaf pair, 1st leaf or pair, 2nd leaf or pair) they should be pricked out and spaced out into new containers with full strength compost/growing mix. A good rule of thumb is 60 to 100 plants per full sized seed tray or 5 – 6 in a 10cm pot.

If they appear too crowded you can thin them out and either replant the thinned out seedlings or chose the best and discard the others. About two weeks before the last expected frost in your area, you should harden off your plants to acclimatise them to the conditions outside. Start off by placing them in a sheltered location outside for a few hours a day, increasing the time until they are out all day. For the final few days leave them out all the time unless a frost is forecast.

Plant them at the required spacing into the final location once they have hardened off.

Once flowering commences, make sure you remove spent or faded blooms so as to encourage new flowers. Annuals have one purpose, to provide a crop of seeds for the following season, if you allow them to go to seed, they have done their job and they will likely fade away and die off. Dead-heading prolongs the flowering period. If you want seeds for next year, wait till late August before allowing any seed heads to form.