



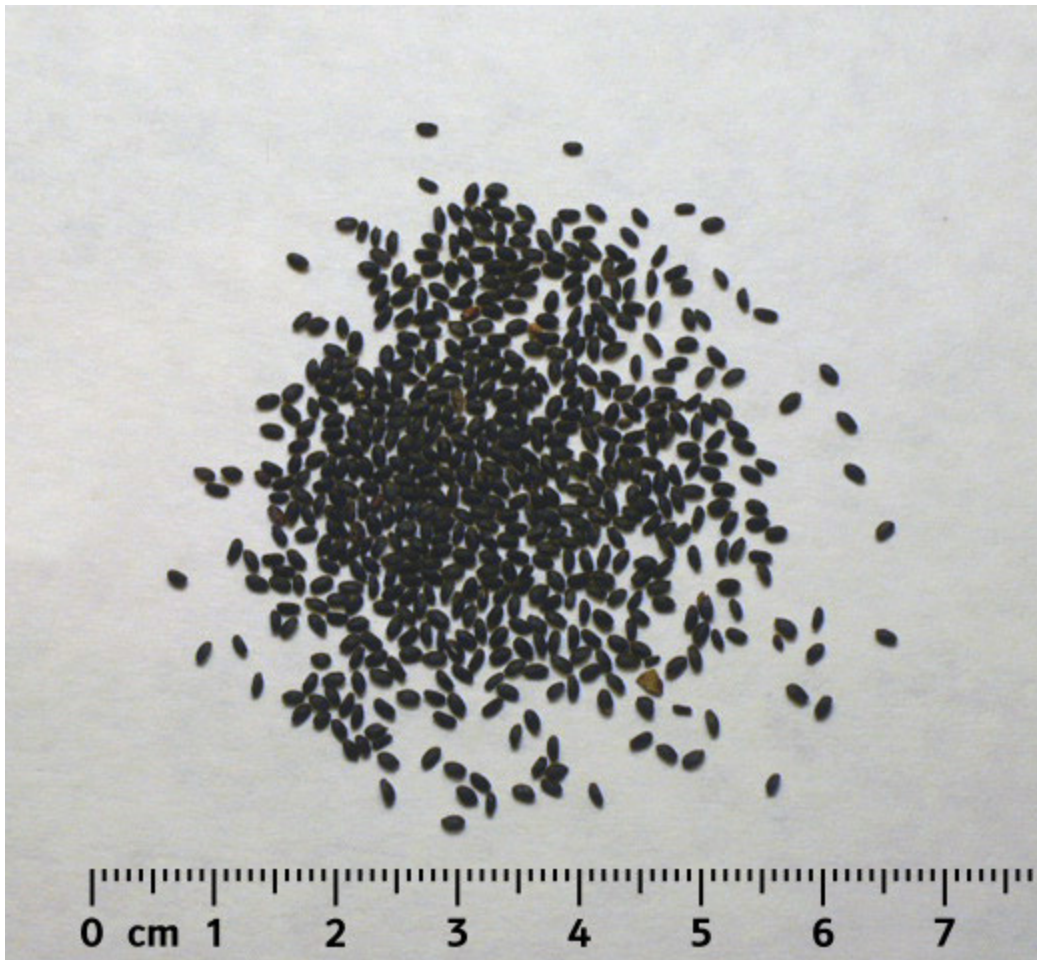
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# Growing Herbs from Seeds

Growing herbs from seed opens up a whole world of choices.

## In the beginning

Growing herbs from seed is rewarding, economical and you can grow more unusual varieties that are hard to find as transplants... unless you shop for plants at The Herb Cottage, of course! All the information a plant needs to germinate, grow and flourish is contained in the little seed. And, seeds are beautiful. Each one is different.



Picture Credit: Tiny, shiny basil seeds. Photo from Wikipedia, By Badagnani (Own work)

## In the beginning

Seeds differ from each other as much as people differ from one another. Basil seeds are tiny and shiny. Dill seed is a soft brownish color and thin and long. Some seeds are large and easy to handle. Some seeds are just like powder, and rather difficult to sow evenly. Mixing them with sand can help you see where you have sown. Some seeds like to germinate in the dark and must be covered by the soil, while others need light to germinate and are surface sown and either tamped in or watered in lightly.

First, of course, you need seed. I recommend beginners start with seed that germinates easily, quickly and gives a lot of bang for your buck, so to speak. Annual herbs tend to germinate and grow the fastest and can be the most rewarding for a novice grower or even a child interested in growing from seed. Fresh seed will give you the best results, so I recommend purchasing fresh seed, especially for your first attempt. Some varieties of herbs that are quick to germinate and easy to grow are basil, dill, borage and cilantro. The edible flowers of nasturtiums have large seed and also germinate quickly.

Other herbs such as parsley, fennel and chives, while easy enough to grow from seed, take longer to germinate and unless care is taken, the seed can rot in the soil before they germinate. So, for this article, I'll stick to herbs that germinate in about 7 – 10 days.

Certainly you can direct seed into your garden beds, but starting your seed in containers will give you more control over the process. In the controlled environment of a container, your seeds won't get washed away by heavy rain, be stolen by birds or rodents or be disturbed by other critters... including the gardener, herself, who may have forgotten where she planted the dill.

Shop for high quality seeds at Botanical Interests.



# Containers

You'll need containers of some sort. Left over plastic containers from purchased plants work just fine. Wash them out in a little bleach water to make sure no pathogens are lurking. About 1/2 cup of bleach to a gallon of water is good. Rinse the containers in plain water and let them dry. You can also find biodegradable pots and peat pellets that work well. With peat pots or pellets, you plant the whole pot or cell into the ground or final pot with no transplant shock.

While your containers are drying, get your potting mix. Seeds like a nice, loose soil mix for best germination. Any good packaged mix will do. Some have fertilizer added, which is OK. Some have a "starter charge" added, which is OK, too. If your mix does not have any fertilizer added, that's OK, too. Don't worry about fertilizer at this point. Seeds have all the fertilizer they need to germinate and grow one or two sets of leaves. At that point it's time to fertilize. More on that later.

After your containers are dry, fill them to the top with your potting mix.



Cell packs filled with dry potting mix.

## Watering & Planting

Then, gently water the containers to settle the mix. If the mix settles down leaving more than about ½ inch of space to the top of the container, add a little more soil and water again. Let the containers drain.



Cell packs and biodegradable seedling cells watered, ready for seeds.

OK. So far, so good. Now, you're ready to plant! Look at the seed pack and see what it says for **planting depth**. I think this is the most important piece of information on the packet. If you plant too deeply, the seed can't germinate. If you plant too shallowly, the seed may dry out too much before germination. To get the seed depth correct, make a little indentation in the container with your finger and place the seed there and then cover it over.

## Planting the Seed



Making indentations with finger to receive seeds. I like to plant 3-5 seeds per cell. This gives me a nice group of plants, and if some of the seed doesn't germinate, I have a better chance with a few seeds per pot. You can divide the seedlings later or, in the case of many herbs, just plant them together as a group.



Cell pack with several cilantro seeds per cell.



Covering cilantro seeds. They need dark to germinate.

## Following the Planting of the Seed

After you've planted, you need to moisten the mix again. There are basically two ways to do this. Watering from the top or from the bottom. Setting your containers in a pan of water will allow the mix to soak up the water without disturbing the seeds. If you water from the top, use a gentle spray to as not to disturb the seeds. If you've planted seeds that need light to germinate, they were sprinkled on top of the potting mix. In that case, I like to use a spray bottle to water in the seeds so they have good contact with the potting medium.

**Very Important!! Don't forget to label your containers.**



I use cut up mini blind slats. Some people use wooden popsicle sticks or even plastic knives or spoons. I write in a dark pencil. Pencil does not fade or wash off. Markers can fade with time, although they do work well on wooden popsicle sticks.

## The Waiting or Germination Period

Now, you need to place the containers somewhere warm. Most seeds like around 70 – 75° F (21 – 23 ° C) soil temperature to germinate. Light is very important as the seedlings emerge. If you have a greenhouse, that's great, because you'll get good light from above. If you don't, a sunny or bright window will work. You'll need to turn the pot daily so the seedlings grow straight and don't lean one way toward the light.

The best solution if you don't have a greenhouse is to use lights. Ordinary fluorescent lights work just fine for seed starting. The light source needs to be kept about 2" (6 cm.) above the tops of the plants. So, you'll need the ability to raise your light source... or lower the seed containers, as needed. You can also start your seeds outdoors if the weather is warm enough. Just locate the containers in a sunny place where they won't be disturbed. The potting medium needs to stay moist, but not soggy. So, depending on where you have your seeds germinating, watering times will vary. Check your containers every day to make sure the mix does not dry out. When seedlings emerge, again make sure they don't dry out, but don't keep the mix soggy.



Basil seedlings in biodegradable cell packs. These are a little too wet!! But, basil doesn't mind the moisture. Another type of herb, oregano or marjoram, for instance, would have to be moved to a drier location in the greenhouse.



## Fertilizing & Planting Up

At this stage, you can start fertilizing your small plants. I use only organic liquid fertilizer. While plants are very young I mix half strength from what it says on the container. As your seedlings grow, they become stronger and more able to be treated like regular plants, not delicate seedlings. At some point, if you planted in plastic cell packs or pots, you might need to pot up the seedlings to allow them to gain some size before planting them in their final spot. If you've grown in peat pots or pellets, the plant will grow big enough in that arrangement to be directly planted in the final spot.



Seedlings in larger biodegradable pots. These will go directly in the ground, in a large container, or be ready for sale in about 2 weeks.

If you've grown your plants indoors, you'll need to harden them off before moving them outdoors permanently. This means placing the plants outdoors for a few hours a day, if it's still cool out, and bringing them back in for the night. Give them a shady spot at first, then gradually move them to the sun. If it's warm, you can leave them outside, but shade is best at first until the plants become more mature and can handle full sun, as many herbs do enjoy.

**Soon you'll have mature, healthy plants that you started yourself, from seed. Imagine how proud you'll feel when you harvest those basil leaves for a capers salad or dill for your pickles, knowing you grew those plants from seed, yourself!**



Here is a happily growing Lemon Basil which I started from seed at the beginning of the Spring. The Lemon Grass in the behind it was also started from seed.

The Herb Cottage -- [theherbcottage.com](http://theherbcottage.com)