



Sowing Native Seeds at Home

Growing Guide

By CBWNPS Member Jane Abel

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The good news is that a greenhouse is not required to successfully rear native plants. As a matter of fact, it is rather worthless for this project. Most seed has a coating that only breaks down from a combination of fluctuating temperatures, moisture and light. When grown outside, Mother Nature does most of this work for us. Shortened days, followed by longer daylight in spring and up and down temperatures are nearly impossible to replicate indoors.

Collecting seed

The timing of seed collection is critical. As a very general rule, the seeds are ripe and ready for collection about 4-6 weeks after prime bloom. If at all possible, check the plants every few weeks. The seed or seed pods should detach from the plant easily. In some plants, such as Lomatium, the seed is often large and drops to the ground when ripe, but it can easily be collected from the ground. Other plants, such as Penstemon, have very small seeds in a hard pod and seed will start to spill out of the pod once it opens. Many members of the aster family have seed attached to pappus, (dandelions and rabbitbrush are good examples) which helps with seed dispersal. This too should be collected when it easily detaches from the plant. Most of the time it is not difficult to determine if the seed is ripe.

Seed Storage:

I store my collected seed in paper envelopes at room temperature. The viability of the seed differs from species to species, but most of it is good for several years. I note the date of the seed collection and where it was collected on the envelope.

Be aware of critters... Native plants are hosts for many insect species and they often arrive home in the envelope along with the seed. Lupine and Balsamroot are possibly the worst, so check the collected seed carefully. Any seed with a pinhole opening is not viable and if there is a live caterpillar or weevil in the envelope, they will make good use of the stored seed. There seem to be two schools of thought on freezing the seed to kill the insects, or not to freeze it as it will damage the embryo. To be on the safe side, check it carefully (use a magnifying glass if necessary) before sealing the envelope. Often you can remove the critter by hand.

When to sow seed

Not all of our native seeds need to be stratified (chilled to break dormancy), but I go on the assumption that most do. I normally like to sow seed sometime in October and have sown *Eriogonum* as late as mid-December. Some species will germinate in early fall (I've had two surprises lately of early germination) but most will not begin to germinate until mid-February.



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Soil mix

Most of the commercially available soil mixes have a very high peat content and once it dries out, it is difficult to re-wet, or at times it stays wet for too long. I mix my own soil, which is about 9 parts coarse sand, 5 parts Sunshine mix #4, 4 parts pumice, 2 parts screened local soil. UW Rare Care uses equal parts of coarse sand and Sunshine mix #4, but I prefer my mix because it drains faster.

Pots and containers

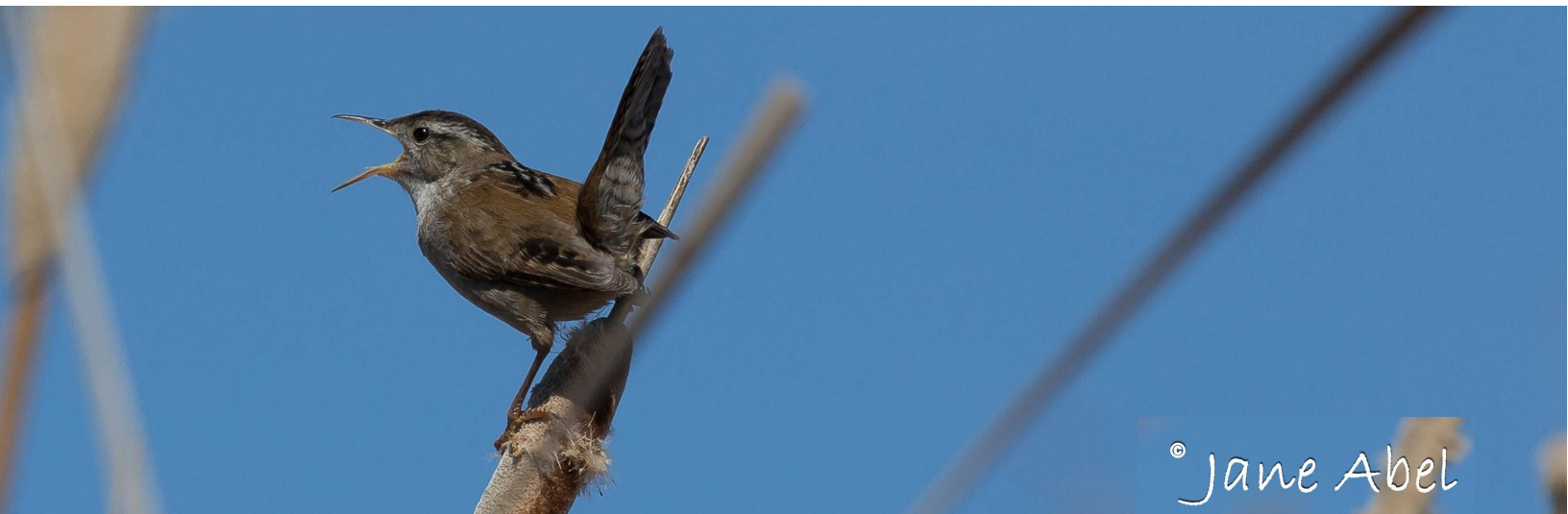
Because I normally acquire extra 4" pots when I buy annuals, this is the container I use most often. If you don't plan to transplant the natives into the ground in late spring, but wish to hold them until fall, you may want to consider a deeper container. Keeping natives happy in mid-summer heat is difficult. If the roots overheat the plants will die in an afternoon. I normally hang shade cloth over the plants by late May, but in spite of this, our 115-degree temperatures this summer were too high for plants in small tubes. I was forced to move all plants in tubes and small containers into thick wooden boxes and then pack soil around the tubes for more protection.

Soil depth

Most of our native seed falls from the mother plant and lies on the ground exposed to the weather, so don't plant it too deep. A thin layer of soil over the seed will keep it from blowing away during the winter weather. A little pumice on top of everything also helps hold it in place. After this water heavily, so that the seed will move slightly into the soil.

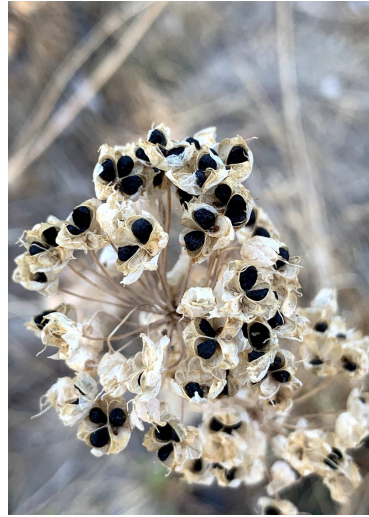
Watering the seed

After sowing the seed and watering it in, I more or less let Mother Nature take over, however if the weather is windy and the soil looks dry, soak it again. Don't be afraid to water in December and January in freezing weather. Overly dry seed doesn't germinate. A pile of snow on top of the seeds is icing on the cake! Depending on the exposure and weather, the seed will usually begin to germinate in mid-February. Watch carefully and don't allow newly germinated seedlings to dry out. At this stage, the natives need even moisture. If they are on a table in direct sun, they may dry out quickly, so watch carefully.



Headaches and hiccups

For the first few years of growing native plants, I would see germination begin and then mysteriously the newly germinated seedlings would disappear. At that time, I was growing the plants in flats, placed on pallets on the ground. I became convinced that somehow mice were devouring my newly germinated seed, so I tried every mouse deterrent I could find. None of them worked. In the following years, we built tables that were 4' off the ground, but the damage in the early spring continued... Finally, one day I was standing near the tables when the guilty party arrived- Dark-eyed Juncos! The birds were eating seed in our feeders and then flying around to the side of the house and plucking the juicy little green plants out of the pots on the table. I now tie metallic bird scare tape to bamboo stakes, and place the stakes every few feet around the plants. The stakes go up as soon as I see germinating plants and I leave this up until the Juncos leave in mid-May. Problem solved.



Sources for supplies

- Sunshine Mix #4 can be purchased at the Richland Home Depot
- Pumice can be purchased from Beaver Bark, but it is normally stored in the building where bulk orders are placed, not inside the main retail building. Also, it is not usually on pallets with the other bagged soil and bark products.
- Screened local soil is also sold by the bag at Beaver Bark. It is marked "dirt"...
- Coarse sand- I have never found the type of coarse sand that Rare Care uses. I normally get bagged playground sand from a hardware store.
- Containers- Stuwe and Sons is located in Tangent, Oregon outside of Portland and offers many different sizes of pots, cones and stands. They will sell and ship small quantities.

Good luck! And remember, if at first you don't succeed, then try, and try again...

Jane

