



David Domoney's

COMPLETE GUIDE

To Seeds and Bulbs





Let's begin at the beginning

Knowing where plants come from and how they grow is important if you want to grow strong, healthy plants.

Understanding seeds and bulbs will help you become a better gardener.

What's in this guide?

First we will look at seeds and the different techniques for sowing them indoors and directly outside.

We will also explore how to care for seedlings, plus the right ways to collect and store seeds from your plants.

In the second part, we will talk about the different types of bulbs, how to plant them and the best ways to create year-round displays.



Growing your own plants from seed is always exciting. Seeing them develop into new plants is very rewarding, and it's a cost-effective way to add to your garden.

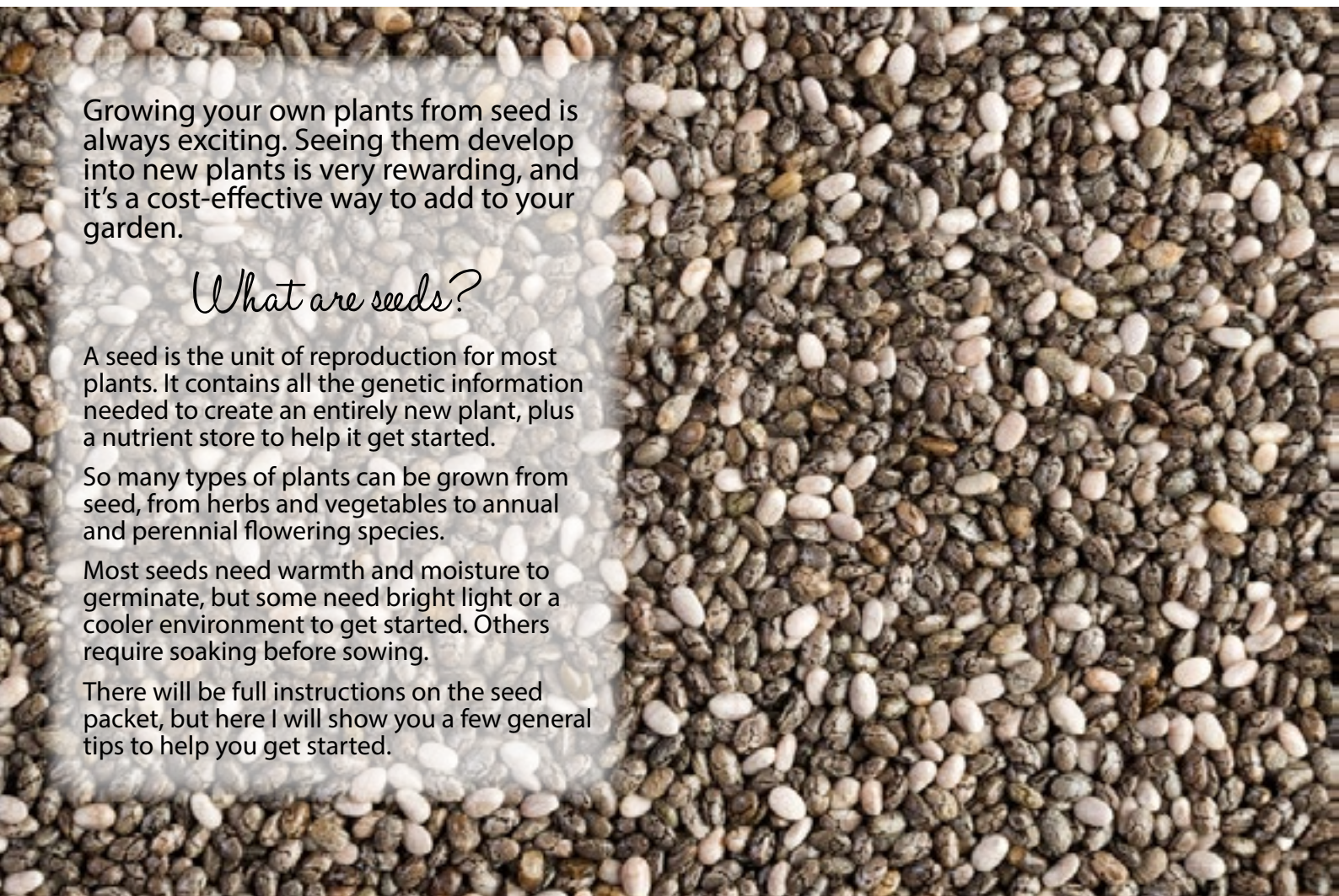
What are seeds?

A seed is the unit of reproduction for most plants. It contains all the genetic information needed to create an entirely new plant, plus a nutrient store to help it get started.

So many types of plants can be grown from seed, from herbs and vegetables to annual and perennial flowering species.

Most seeds need warmth and moisture to germinate, but some need bright light or a cooler environment to get started. Others require soaking before sowing.

There will be full instructions on the seed packet, but here I will show you a few general tips to help you get started.



Sowing outdoors

Some seeds can be sown directly into the ground where you want them to grow.

What to do

Before you start, it is important to prepare the soil. Break up clumps and remove any weeds or stones.

Dig over the soil to a spade's depth a few days before sowing.

On the day, rake over the area to give it a smooth, crumb-like surface. This helps seeds germinate and grow strong roots.

How to sow seeds

The sowing method will depend on the seed type.

Some, like wildflower seed mixes, should be scattered across the soil.

Seeds for vegetable crops need to be sown in drills. Use a bamboo cane or the edge of a trowel to dig shallow trenches in lines. The depth and spacing of these will be written on the seed packet.

Drop the seeds into the drills and use a rake to gently cover them with soil.

Now what?

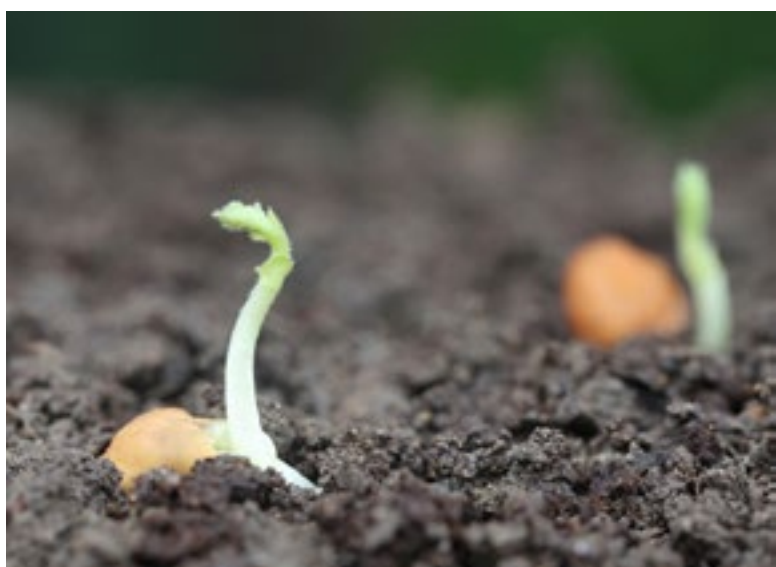
Water in and mark where you have sown so you don't plant something else there!

Marking the ends of the drills also helps you spot weeds growing up between the rows sooner.

Make a seed bomb

If you want to sow a seed mixture, make a bomb. It's a cluster of seeds in a ball of soil - throw it into any corner of the garden and let nature do the rest.

Mix five parts compost with three parts potter's clay and one part seeds. Add water until it starts to stick together, then mould into golf balls. Leave in the sun for three hours until it sets solid, then throw to sow!



Sowing indoors



Many seeds are more successful if you start them off indoors in small pots or a seed tray.

What to do

Buy special purpose seed compost for this and make sure it is firmed well down and lightly watered.

Then use a pencil or dibber to make small holes, leaving plenty of space between them, and drop a seed into each hole.

Gently cover the seed with a little compost and water in.

For tiny seeds, just sprinkle them over the top of the compost in a seed tray.

Gently cover them with another fine layer of compost and water well on a fine spray setting.

Now what?

Place the pots or seed tray in a suitable spot according to the instructions – it may be a sunny windowsill or a cool greenhouse.

Some plants need the warmer environment of a heated propagator.

It won't be long before you'll see the first tiny shoots poking through the compost.

TIP:
Don't forget to label the pot or tray with seed variety and date sown! It's very difficult to tell seedlings apart.



Seedlings

Thinning out

As the seedlings start to get bigger, the plants often end up growing too close together.

In that case, pick the weakest ones out. This is known as thinning out and is necessary to give the strongest plants room to grow and succeed.

Details of final spacings are on the seed packet. Stick to this to give plants and roots enough space to spread out.





TIP:
Don't overwater the seedlings – it's one of the most common reasons they die. Tiny plants don't need that much water!

Pricking out

Once your seedlings have two or more sets of leaves, they will need more space to grow and should be moved into a new tray or pots, a process known as pricking out.

Water the seedlings an hour or so before moving them to make it easier to separate the roots from the soil.

Prepare the new pots with compost and, as before when sowing the seeds, make a small hole in the compost.

Drop the roots into the new hole and gently firm in the compost, taking extra care around the stem.

Water in and place the seedlings in a well-lit spot, ensuring they are protected from frost.

Problems

Many people find that their seedlings all lean to one side of the tray – this is because they grow towards the sunlight. Rotate the seed tray every few days to stop this happening.

Or build a DIY reflector – cut apart a cereal box and fold a panel to make a three-sided stand.

Cover it in aluminium foil and stand around the seed tray. The sides should be at 45 degree angles.



Acclimatisation

As they increase in size, the small plants will need moving into a larger pot.

Then they can be gradually acclimatised to outdoor conditions.

Do this by moving the pot outside during the day and bringing it back in at night.

When all risk of frost has passed, you can transplant your plants into the garden.



TIP:
Always handle seedlings by the leaves and not the stem, which is very fragile. If you damage a leaf, a new one will grow. If you damage the stem, the plant will die.



Collecting seeds

TIP:
Don't
deadhead the
flowers of plants
you want to
harvest seeds
from.



Make the most of nature's bounty by collecting the seeds plants offer up for free!

You can harvest seeds from your own garden, or even local streets and the wild. Collect seeds from trees, shrubs, annuals, perennials and biennials, plus herbs and ornamental grasses.

The most important thing is to collect seeds when they are ripe.

There is no set time – the plant will give them up when it is ready.

Seed heads will often change colour, from green to brown, red or black.

The seeds themselves may also change colour. They will go from green or white to a brown or black colour, indicating that they are ready. Flower heads will start to fall apart when the seeds are ripe.

You need to catch the seeds after they have ripened, but before they disperse. Keep checking on them daily. Most seeds ripen some two months after the plant first flowers.

Types of seeds

Seeds can come in many forms, which will dictate how you collect them.

- Berries (cotoneaster)
- Capsules (poppy)
- Catkins (birch)
- Exploding seedheads (euphorbia)
- Nuts (hazel)
- Pods (sweet peas)
- Winged seed (sycamore)





Collecting seeds

Here's my failsafe way to collect seeds. You will need plenty of plastic freezer bags, which keep the seeds dry and uncontaminated.

Choose a dry day. Place the bag over the pod or flower head to make sure the seeds don't fall all over the ground, and cut it into the bag.

Collect as many as possible.

Take the bags indoors and gently tip them out over some spread out newspaper.

The plants should release the seeds, but if not you can gently break open seedheads or shake the seeds out.

Berries should be put in a fine sieve and mashed. Wash away the pulp with cold water and leave the seeds to dry for a few days.

Now what?

If there is surrounding material (chaff) on any of your seeds, make sure to clean it off. Chaff can harbour diseases and lead to damping off and unviable seeds.

Storage

Some seeds, such as hellebore, should be sown immediately after collection. But most can be stored until spring.

Store seeds in a dry, airtight container. Paper bags are a good option, but I use old Tic Tac boxes. They are small, handy and sealable.

Make sure to label all your containers so you know what's in them!

You can also add a dehumidifier like Silica gel to stop seeds deteriorating. Then store in a cool place – a fridge is ideal.

Many seeds will last for years in a dry environment at around 5C.

Remember, seeds from hybrid plants will be very variable, so it's best to take them from 'true' plants.

TIP: Mix your seeds into wallpaper paste and use a cake icing tool to sow them. This means they'll be surrounded by moisture, giving them a good head start.





Bulbs

Bulbs are energy powerhouses that bloom year after year. They store the energy like a battery over winter and erupt into flower in spring.

Bulbs are brilliant because they are foolproof plants – hardly anything can go wrong with them.

Plant them too deep, too shallow or even upside down and they will still flower.

They are also a great investment. If cared for properly, they will spread and give you more plants and more flowers every year.

Bulbs are incredibly versatile plants – they look great in the border to fill in the gaps around other flowers and shrubs, or even growing up through your lawn in spring. They are also excellent in containers for indoors or outdoors.

What are they exactly?

A bulb is created when a plant sends its energy and nutrients below ground at the end of the growing season, like charging a battery.

It stores them over winter while the plant is naturally dormant. The following year, the energy in the bulb is ready and waiting for the plant to regrow and flower again.

This means that the quality of its new growth and flowering is already determined in the bulb.

You should try to buy the biggest, healthiest-looking bulbs possible.

When the plants begin to die back, don't remove any wilting or yellowing plant leaves. They are busy sending their nutrients back into the bulb for next year.

Everyone is familiar with the big four spring flowering bulbs: Tulips, Crocus, Daffodils and Hyacinths.

But there are lots of other bulbs to bring colour and interest to your garden all year round.



DID YOU KNOW that you eat bulbs? Leek, fennel, garlic and onion are all edible bulbs.



Spring flowering bulbs



Bulb displays bring a welcome splash of colour in early spring when very few other plants are in flower.

They grow extremely well in containers and can make a real statement in your house or on the patio.

Try a pot full of daffodils, hyacinths or tulips in the same colour for impact. Muscari look elegant in containers too.

If you're planting in the garden border, create a group of six or seven bulbs together for a bold display.

And remember to take the plant's height into account: taller at the back, shorter in front.

On the lawn

You can also "naturalise" bulbs by planting them under your lawn – Daffodils or Crocus work best. Simply use a strong trowel to dig out the grass, plant the bulbs as normal and replace the turf over the top.

The best time to plant most spring flowering bulbs is in autumn between September and November, but avoid putting them in very wet ground.

How to plant a lasagne container

One of the most popular ways to plant bulbs in a container is to use layers to create the 'lasagne' effect.

Start with a layer of gritty compost at the bottom, then add a layer of daffodil bulbs, spaced slightly further apart than usual.

Cover those with a layer of compost so you can just see the bulb tips, then add tulip bulbs in the spaces between the daffodils.

Add more compost as before, and then plant crocus or muscari bulbs on top. Cover with a thicker layer of compost and water in.

Several varieties will push up together in the spring to give a dense, striking display.





Year-round bulbs



Bulbs are famous for their spring displays, but there are also bulbs that flower throughout the year.

Summer Flowering Bulbs

Bulbs can also provide great summer colour. Most summer flowering bulbs should be planted in the new year and early spring when the soil starts to warm up.

Begonias are an exception: they should be grown in pots from early spring and planted out in June.

For colour bursts, try different varieties of Allium – tall flower globes in distinct shades of purple.

Crocsmia, Lilies and Gladioli also come in a huge range of colours to brighten up your garden.

Bear in mind that not all summer flowering bulbs are fully hardy, so plants like Gladioli may need to be lifted out of the ground and stored over winter before the first frosts arrive.

Autumn Flowering Bulbs

To continue your bulb displays into autumn, try *Nerine Bowdenii* for an exotic burst of long-lasting colour. It grows better in coarse, sandy soil.

If you have a bare patch in the shade or beneath a tree, hardy *Cyclamen* are ideal. They will quickly spread and flourish in these difficult spots.

Dahlias are perfect for late summer and early autumn border and container displays.

Colchicum (Autumn Crocus) are also excellent autumn bulbs for the front of the border or in a rockery.

Plant your autumn flowering bulbs in spring or early summer.





Winter Flowering Bulbs

Snowdrops are one of the earliest flowers to appear at the start of the year and look spectacular planted in large groups anywhere in the garden.

Winter Aconite is another early bloomer and great for ground cover under trees. It will spread quickly to give you a floral yellow carpet throughout February and March.

Another good bulb for ground cover is Chionodoxa (Glory of the Snow) which has dainty, star-shaped flowers.

Winter bulbs should be planted in late summer and early autumn.

Planting bulbs

Bulbs are not that fussy but they will flower better if you give them the right conditions.

Choose a sunny spot with well-drained soil – the only thing bulbs can't stand is excess water. It causes them to rot.

Most bulbs like to be planted two to three times as deep as they are tall.

Once you have dug your hole, line the base with a layer of grit or sand.

Then plant the bulb using the 'light bulb' technique – push and twist it into the soil.

If you simply place the bulb on the surface, you could leave a gap for rainwater to collect which will rot the bulb.

Check that you have the bulb the right way up before planting – if in doubt, plant sideways!

TIP:
Deter pesky squirrels from digging up your bulbs and eating them by grating a little scented soap over the top of the soil. The cheaper and smellier the better! They won't like the taste of that!





Dividing bulbs



Bulbs naturally divide and spread on their own. But the space around them can become congested, which reduces flowering.

If an established group of bulbs starts to bloom less, it's a sign that the bulbs need dividing. Daffodils especially are prone to overcrowding.

Dig up the bulbs carefully after flowering has finished. Take care not to damage the bulb, and don't pull the foliage.

You're looking for large bulbs that have a smaller offset growing on the side. Simply detach the offset from the main bulb.

Offsets may take a year or two to grow big enough to bloom. The larger the offset, the sooner the new bulb will flower.



Replant the bulbs

Replant the offset bulbs and give them plenty of space to grow. You should also spread out your original bulbs to reduce any overcrowding.

Store the bulbs

You can also pot up offsets into small containers to give them a head start, and plant them out in the garden when they have grown bigger.

Or brush off all the soil and store in a mesh bag in a dry, dark place. Check on the bulbs regularly and remove any that start to rot.



FUN FACT: Bulbs became cheaper in Victorian times, but there were exceptions. The new 'King Alfred' daffodil in 1900 cost the equivalent of a month's salary for a single bulb!





The End

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