

Plant easy-to-grow and quick-to-bloom seeds (such as marigold, zinnia, and nasturtium) directly into the ground when it has warmed up to stay.

The first step in sowing seed outdoors is preparing the soil so it is loose, well-drained, and fertile. Spade the soil to a depth of at least eight inches, breaking up large clumps and removing stones and debris.

Mix in organic matter, such as peat moss, leaf mold, or compost, to enrich and condition the soil. Also, check the pH with a soil test, and adjust the level to as close to neutral (7.0) as possible using lime or sulfur. Mix in a quick-acting dry fertilizer, such as 5-10-5, at the rate of two to three pounds per 100 square feet.

Rake the seed-bed level and to a fine texture. Now you're ready to sow. First, water the soil well. Flowers for a cutting or formal garden should be sown in straight rows, while others may be scattered randomly. For straight sowing, make shallow furrows with a trowel, finger, or yardstick to the proper planting depth. Sow the seeds evenly or thinly by tapping them from the packet or by spacing them by hand. After sowing, pinch the soil together and firm.

Proper sowing depth

Sowing at the correct depth is critical to good germination. If it's too shallow, the seeds may dry out; too deep, and the young seedlings may not make it to the surface. Fine seeds are best started indoors, but they can be grown outdoors if left uncovered and treated with extra care. Firm the seeds into the soil with a board. Then mist gently. Larger seeds are planted to a depth of two to three times their thickness.

Your main task for the next week or two until the seeds germinate is to keep the seed-bed constantly moist but never soggy. Water with a fine spray every day, if necessary. The seed-bed must never be allowed to dry out.

On a hot, windswept location, some shading is beneficial. Or cover the bed temporarily with a thin cheesecloth. This will slow evaporation and keep the seedlings from starting life with a sunburn.

Keep the area weeded, because weeds will compete with the seedlings for food and water and will cut down on good air circulation, inviting disease. Remove weeds carefully, so you don't disturb the seedlings' roots. Water well after weeding in case the roots have been jolted. Seeds planted in rows will make the annuals easy to distinguish from unwanted invaders of the garden.