

Digging Deep-Gardening with Cynthia Brian

From Seed to Shining Seed

“I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.” – Henry David Thoreau



Poppies and peppers grown from seed are kept moist and warm by a blanket of straw. Photos Cynthia Brian

With your first bite of sweet white corn, a juicy garden ripe tomato, or a thirst-quenching mouthful of watermelon, there is no mistaking that summer has arrived. There is nothing better than going into the garden of eating pleasures! With all the hundreds of varieties of seeds available today, it's challenging to know what will work best in your unique micro-climate. When do you plant and how do you know when you'll be able to harvest? Since we can enjoy a cornucopia of edibles throughout the year, I'm providing notes on how best to direct seed to ensure an abundant harvest in any season.

My first rule of thumb is to survey your family to find out what everyone enjoys most. (And if your kids say doughnuts, let them plant cheerio seeds. When nothing grows explain to them that some years you'll get the doughnuts, but mostly you'll just get the holes!)

The next step is to prepare your beds. To ensure a successful crop, choose a sunny area with well-drained, enriched soil. Weed the area, break up the clumps of dirt, remove rocks and stones, rake two or three times. Plant in rows, squares, raised beds (easier on the back and for harvesting), in a 2 by 3 foot plot, containers, or mixed in your flowerbeds. Some of my most successful harvests have come from vegetables in my potager combination garden and even my pots.

Set out the seed packets that you want to grow. Read the label and the directions carefully to determine how many seeds to plant, how to space, and how deep. To save seeds and thinning waste, I use the minimum amount of seeds recommended, then follow up with more seeds a few weeks later for succession planting. Cover seeds to a depth of no more than three times their diameter.

Consistent watering is mandatory for germination. Some seeds have a tough outer shell that needs to be softened for up to 10 days with constant moisture. Other seeds (varieties of beans) must soak overnight in water before planting. In a drought year, planning a garden by seeding only may not be as cost effective as planting seedlings. Once the plants are established, you can cut back on the water schedule.

This year has been challenging with the variance in weather patterns – the daylight hours are scorching hot and by night the fog rolls in with its chilly sting. Just when we thought all danger of frost had passed, a freeze emerged. Since we don't know what the season has in store, I've learned to plant more than one variety as insurance, or you may elect to plant indoors first, then transplant later. When shoots emerge, add a top layer of straw to help maintain moisture and heat.

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When the flowers of Nigella fade, the dried pods can be popped open to spread the seeds in new beds.