

Grow Your Own Native Plants Using Winter Seed Sowing Techniques

by Susan Studer King, Licking County Pollinator Pathway

All photos courtesy of Susan King



Native plants are essential to pollinators, local food webs and ecosystems. Despite growing demand for pollinator-friendly flowers and shrubs, many regions don't have native plant nurseries nearby and the majority of plants sold at traditional garden centers are native to Asia, Europe and other parts of the world (and don't support the full lifecycle of butterflies, wild bees and other pollinators).

To help residents create pollinator-friendly gardens and landscapes, Licking County Pollinator Pathway is partnering with community organizations to offer workshops focused on growing your own native plants using winter seed sowing techniques.

Participants at these hands-on workshops are learning how to grow native plants for their home gardens, plus have enough to "plant it forward" and pass along extra plants to neighbors or donate them to a Pollinator Pathway community project or plant sale. Similar to the "plant a row for the hungry" movement which encourages gardeners to grow extra vegetables for local food pantries, workshop participants will be encouraged to "plant a plot for hungry pollinators."

Growing native plants from seed is relatively simple, but the timing and techniques are different from those used for vegetable garden plants like cucumbers or tomatoes.

“It can be hard for experienced veggie gardeners to wrap their head around the idea that you need to start native seeds in the middle of winter,” shared Master Gardener and Licking County Pollinator Pathway volunteer Julie Strohmeyer. “Conventional garden wisdom is that the growing season starts in the spring and ends in the fall. But native plant seeds need cold conditioning or stratification, so winter is a great time to sow.”

With seed money from the Denison University Venture Philanthropy Fund, Licking County Pollinator Pathway volunteers will be fanning out to local libraries, schools, parks, and arboretums to distribute native plant seed and demonstrate two methods to germinate native seeds.

“What’s great about winter seed sowing is that you can use repurposed containers. No greenhouse, grow lights or other fancy equipment required,” Strohmeyer explained.



Photo: Volunteers build wood-framed boxes for sowing seeds in pots outdoors. The hardware cloth screens help protect the seeds from rodents.

One method involves using milk jugs as mini greenhouses to sow seeds outdoors during winter. Another method, inspired by the [Wild Seed Project](#) and [Eco59 Seed Collective](#), involves sowing seeds in pots and placing them outdoors in a hinged wood-framed box covered with a screen or hardware cloth and branding them—literally— with the Pollinator Pathway butterfly logo. Photos below show the branding process.

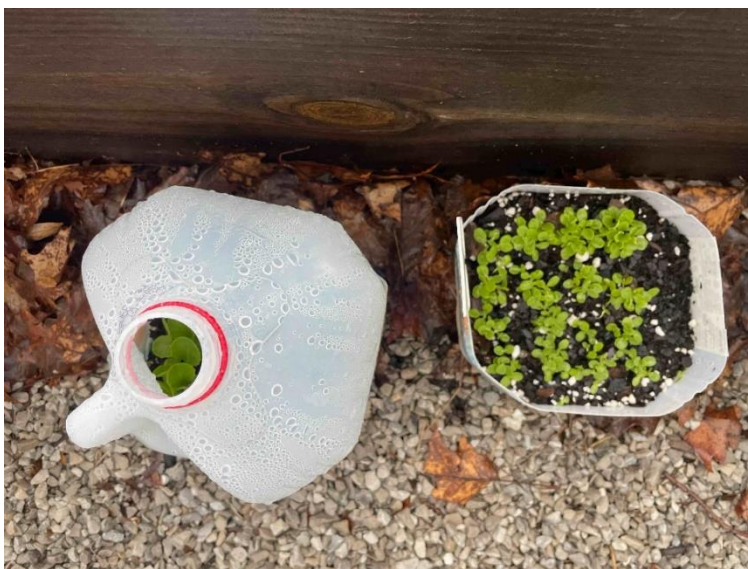
The simplicity of these sowing methods makes growing native plants from seeds approachable to beginning and experienced gardeners alike. All four winter sowing workshops filled to capacity quickly and now have waiting lists.

As Strohmeyer summed it up “Pollinator Pathway has activated interest in native plants in Central Ohio by teaching people to be native plant growers. That’s a really smart way to grow a movement!”



Photos, clockwise from top:

Branding the wooden seed boxes; a close-up view of the Pollinator Pathway logo brand; seedlings beginning to sprout in a milk container planter.



Resources

[Autumn and Winter Seed Sowing in Six Easy Steps](#). Wild Seed Project

[A Winter Seed Sowing Project to Banish the Blahs](#). Pollinator Pathway Blog