

Cold Starts: Seed Stratification vs. Winter Sowing

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Not all seeds sprout the same way. Some need a cold nap before they wake up, while others thrive when sown outdoors in winter. December is the perfect time to explore both seed stratification and winter sowing.

Seed Stratification

- Many perennials, herbs, and native wildflowers (like milkweed, lavender, and coneflowers) need weeks of cold, moist conditions to break dormancy.
- Stratification mimics nature: seeds are placed in a damp medium (like sand or peat) and stored in the refrigerator for 4–8 weeks.
- By spring, they're primed to germinate once planted.

Winter Sowing

- Instead of the fridge, seeds are sown outdoors in containers (milk jugs, soda bottles, or clear tubs) with drainage holes.
- These mini-greenhouses sit outside, exposed to rain, snow, and natural temperature swings.
- Hardy vegetables (spinach, lettuce, Swiss chard, kale, cabbage) and native flowers sprout when conditions are right, often earlier and stronger than indoor starts.

The Difference

- Stratification is about preparing seeds indoors with controlled cold.
- Winter sowing is about letting nature do the work outdoors.
- Both methods give gardeners a head start and expand what can be grown successfully.

December offers the long, steady cold period seeds need. Think of it as a gift to your future garden: a little preparation now means healthier sprouts and earlier blooms come spring.

Resources:

<https://cce.cornell.edu/orleans/winter-sowing-101>

<https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/ym105>

<https://www.ramseymastergardeners.org/post/all-about-seed-stratification>

<https://piedmontmastergardeners.org/article/seed-stratification-why-does-temperature-make-a-difference>

