

Seed Raising – by Chris Davies (cactus.woodedge@btinternet.com).

While I don't claim my approach to be the only one, and I do urge members to find out what works for them, my way of raising plants from seed has done me pretty well over the last 10 years or so.

The Propagator - I built my own propagator, using a commercial formed plastic cover (bought from my local Garden Centre) and cutting wood to make a box onto which this fits. The wood is lined with plastic after well varnishing with marine varnish.

Heating – I bought a 10 ft soil warming cable and a rod thermostat, added a base of sand, laid the cable, fixed the thermostat in place and covered the cable with more sand.

Testing - I tested the heating in the winter to make sure that soil in pots placed on the sand could get up to temperature (approximately 23C). If it gets too hot, then the thermostat should handle that, if too cool then take some sand off.

[Obviously you can buy a propagator, though this way offers a greater repair facility, should things go wrong]

Seed Trays and Pots – for ease of handling, I don't put seed pots straight onto the sand surface, but use standard seed trays – 2 of which fit snugly into the wooden box base. Do check this when you are making the box!! I use 2" square or round pots as available, and 24 of these fit nicely in each seed tray.

Compost - Over the years I have made my compost more and more mineral based, so now it is mixed simply from 1 part of JI No 2, sieved to remove any big pieces, and 2 parts of small horticultural grit. I microwave this so the dampness in the compost effectively boils off thereby sterilising the soil. Don't drive off all the moisture though else you'll have a tedious job of wetting it again.

Sowing – Each seed pot is filled to about 1 cm below the rim of the pot, and slightly tamped down. I usually sow just one packet of from 10 -20 seeds in each pot, sprinkling them evenly over the surface, but trying not to get too many at the edge.

Watering – I then soak each pot in boiled water into which a tablet of Chinosol has been dissolved at half strength. I use this strength as there are reports of Chinosol inhibiting germination, but I still want to ensure a sterile environment for the young seedlings.

Bagging – taking the thoroughly watered pot out of the soaking tray, I let it drain a little, and then put 2 pots at a time into a small clear plastic bag and tie the top closed with the metal ties provided. The bagged pots then go into the seed trays and the trays into the propagator.

Lighting – My propagator goes under the bench on a thick sheet of polystyrene to conserve heat, and I have built a framework from which 4 x 25watt domestic energy saving lights are fitted. These are on for 13 hours a day by means of an appropriate time switch.

And then I sit back and wait to see how quickly the seed germinate. If the seeds are fresh, that usually happens between 7 and 14 days, although some species can take a little longer.

I keep the seedlings in their bags for about 3 months before taking them out of the propagator and covering the seed trays with a simple clear plastic top.

In about another 2-3 months the seedlings are large enough to be pricked out, into seed trays with the same compost mix as the seeds were sown in. These grow on then until the autumn, when they should be big enough to survive the winter.

My sowing cycle usually is – 1st sowing – late February or March; 2nd sowing – late May or early June; and if I have been over-optimistic about seed buying, another sowing in August.

The last sowing won't be big enough to prick out, so they are grown on under the lights in the propagator until the next year, with the temperature reduced to about 15C. By Spring they have caught up with the earlier sown seedlings.