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# Sowing techniques – outdoors



## Equipment required

Where possible, sowing direct in the soil outside is recommended unless you are able to provide ideal growing conditions inside. This often means delaying sowings until soil temperatures have warmed and conditions are more favourable.

However, most crops will catch up and conditions can be improved for plants through the use of fleece, cloches and small tunnels. Soil can also be warmed using plastic sheeting for a few weeks before sowing.

## Tilth

- Your soil should be worked to produce a fine crumbly structure through the top 5-10 cm. This can be done using forks and rakes, 3 or 4 pronged cultivators, or through a powered tiller or small rotavator.
- A crumblier soil is required for fine seeds (*ie* carrots) than for large seeds (*ie* beans).
- Avoid walking on or working the soil if it is very wet or frozen (generally if the soil sticks to your boots it is too wet). If you have to garden in wet conditions, use a plank to work from, thereby reducing compaction.

## Drills

- Most vegetable seeds need sowing in shallow trenches made in the soil called drills.
- Mark out where the drill will go using a taught string line or a piece of straight timber (such as a metre long measuring stick).
- Use the corner of a hoe, or a trowel, to make a narrow drill in the soil. Check the seed packet to find out the sowing depth. Ensure that the drill is made to this depth, evenly along its length.
- Some crops such as peas, early carrots, radishes and cut-and-come-again salads do best in a wide drill. Use either the end of a hoe or a small spade to make this.
- The soil should have been cultivated deep enough so that you don't reach undisturbed soil when making the drill.
- Water the drill using a watering can fitted with a fine rose before sowing the seed. This avoids washing the seeds away and capping the soil, which makes it hard for seedlings to emerge.
- Sow seeds along the length of the drill. For many crops, such as lettuce or French beans, seeds should be sown at measured intervals, putting in 2 or 3 at each station. These will provide back ups and should be thinned to leave just one if they all grow well. Other crops, such as carrots with very fine seed, should be sown in a thin line, perhaps even mixing with sand first to allow easier distribution. These will need to be thinned at the seedling stage to allow remaining plants to reach their optimum size.
- Cover the seed with soil from the side of the drill using either a rake, hoe, a trowel or your hand. Be careful not to disturb the seeds, especially if using a rake to do this.
- Label the row with the name of the vegetable, the variety and the sowing date.

## Larger seeds

Larger seeds that require wider spacing, such as sweetcorn, marrows, pumpkins, broad beans and also garlic, can be easily planted by children using a dibber or a bulb planter. Seed potatoes can be

planted in a drill, but are best planted by children into individual holes, using either a bulb planter or a trowel.

## Watering

- If adequate water has been applied to the drill before sowing, there should be no need to water the row until the seedlings appear. After this it is really down to time available and water scarcity.
- Seedlings must be watered, particularly in dry weather, or they will not establish. Use a fine rose or set up a seep hose, perhaps on a timer.
- On established plants, fewer, heavier waterings give better results. Frequent light doses only wet the top few centimetres and don't encourage the root system to travel downwards, leaving the plant prone to suffering in a drought.
- Avoid wetting the leaves when watering, as in hot sun they will scorch. Water the soil around the base of the plants instead.