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Starting Herbs from Seeds

by Mary Sisson Eibs

As the weather begins to warm I've found my thoughts wandering toward planting. Since we still do not have our garden prepared, this presents a slight problem. However, I do not discourage easily. In fact, I'm becoming more adventurous. I'm learning to try new things, to explore other options. The latest is growing herbs from seed.

I received a free packet of *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Lady' in last month's issue of *The Herb Companion*. After following all the planting instructions I actually have one already coming up. At least, that's what I think it is. I have hope that I'll be successful. You see, I've never grown herbs from seed. Once in my past I read somewhere that herbs were so hard to grow from seed that one should just avoid the frustration and buy plants. But since I have nowhere to put plants, I'm going to try starting my herbs from seed in the hopes that my garden and my plants will be ready at the same time.

Rodale's *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs* has some helpful hints for those interested in growing their herbs from seed. Here are some of their suggestions:

First, keep in mind that you should plant your seeds 6-8 weeks before you plan to set the plants out. Also, some sources recommend chilling, soaking, and even slightly scarring certain herb seeds before planting. This information may appear on the back of the seed packet.

Line the bottom of flats or pots with one sheet of paper towel and add fish tank gravel or perlite to aid in drainage. Mix 1 part potting soil or fine compost, 2 parts sand and vermiculite, and 1 part peat moss. Moisten this mixture and fill your containers. If you are planting in flats, plant seeds 2" apart or in clusters of 3 for individual pots. Cover with a thin layer of soil or sand. Most herb seeds germinate in the darkness. However, if your seeds need light to germinate, just press them lightly into the soil and do not cover them. Mist your flats regularly and keep them in an area of the house that stays around 65-70 degrees constantly. Some people use heating mats under their flats for more uniform heat.

Cover your containers with glass or plastic. Have patience. Some herb seeds can take up to four weeks to germinate. Remove the covers once the seeds begin to germinate. Move the containers to a sunny window or under fluorescent lights. Thin rows if they seem crowded. The soil should be kept moist until seedlings are about 2" tall. You can allow the soil to dry between waterings at this point. Harden off your plants by placing them in a sheltered outdoor spot during the warmer periods of the day. Plant them after all danger of frost has passed.

Wish me luck, fellow herb lovers. This has certainly been my year for living dangerously and now it's even spreading into my herb garden.

HERB SEEDS NEEDING LIGHT TO GERMINATE: angelica, chamomile, chervil, dill, feverfew, lemon balm, mugwort, savory, yarrow. (Rodale's *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs*, p. 243)