

Tips and Tricks and Cautions

One of the best sources of milk jugs...besides your own kitchen...is a coffee shop. My local Bigby's has been very cooperative. They can save 25 jugs in 3 or 4 days. Be sure to pick them up each day and buy a cup of something.

Gallon milk jugs are not the only containers that can be used as well...1/2 gallon milk jugs, large soda bottles, rotisserie chicken and other food containers, aluminum roasting pans also work well. Just be sure that they will hold enough soil and allow enough head room for seedlings to develop 2-3 true leaves. Seeds planted in small pots or 6-packs can be placed in vented seed starting trays or tote-type storage containers.

Make at least 4 drainage holes **before** you cut your milk jugs and be sure they are large enough (1/4 inch) and clear of obstruction. Don't be stingy. The smaller your holes the more you will need.

Tools for making drainage holes: drill, sharp implement heated in a flame (e.g. Phillips screwdriver), soldering iron, hot glue gun, utility knife.

I put a coffee filter in the bottom of my jugs. It keeps the soil inside and the slugs out.

In addition to drainage holes, the container must be vented. The hole at the top of a milk jug or soda bottle is enough. Throw the caps away. If you are using an unvented container make some vent holes just as you would drainage holes.

Cut your container in half leaving an inch or so uncut to act as a hinge. If your container has a handle (e.g. milk jug) the base of the handle should be uncut to act as the hinge. Use a kitchen shears, a utility knife, or a utility scissors.

Most instructions suggest sealing the jugs with duct tape after planting. Dollar store tape is said to work well. But there are other options. I have a hole punch and punch two holes on either side of the half way mark from the hinge. I punch a hole in the top and bottom halves of the container and secure with a number of flexible options: zip ties, twist ties, pipe cleaners are ones that I have tried. The zip ties will need to be replaced if you have to open the jug before spring and your hands will get cold. Using closings other than duct tape may leave some gaps which could cause a little more drying out. You will need to check them more often and water.

Fill jugs with potting soil, not seed starting mix, which contains no nutrients and will not sustain seedlings as they put out their first sets of true leaves. Do not use potting soils labeled "weed free" which may be chemically treated to prevent weed growth.

Soil in jugs should be at least 3 inches deep for best results as it allows you to leave seedlings in the sprouting container until they are stronger before repotting. A 2 cubic foot bag of potting soil should fill around 20 milk jugs.

Keep an eye on the weather. Extremes of temperature (especially between night and day) can be damaging. You'll want to consider throwing a cover over the jugs for protection. Depending on the time of winter/spring you may want to open or close the jug to protect tender seedlings.

Happy Winter Sowing