



Botanical Interests' colorful illustrated seed packets.

Winter Garden Guide

Seeds, Seeds, Seeds

The cold weather doesn't have to stop you from spending time gardening. In fact, early winter is the best time to prepare for your spring garden. Start building your herb-seed wish list, organizing your beautiful seed packets and designing your garden space.

Nurturing herbs from seeds offers many benefits to the herb gardener: You get a head start in the garden; you can minimize the chance of introducing soil-borne diseases to your garden; you'll save money; and you may even have fun along the way. So, if you have the time and the patience to start herbs from seed, gather your favorite seed catalogs and start plotting. —Gina DeBacker

DOs and DON'Ts for Seed Starting

All herbs have their own preferences. Once you've purchased your seeds, pay attention to the information on the seed packet. But here are universal rules for successful seed starting:

DON'T plant French tarragon and specific mint cultivars from seed. According to Nancy Bubel, author of *The New Seed-Starts Handbook* (Rodale Press, 1988), French tarragon doesn't provide viable seeds and specific mint cultivars hybridize readily and, more often than not, fail to come true to the seeds listed in catalogs.

DO plant in seed starting mix, not natural soil. Before your seeds sprout, **DO** provide seeds with the warmth they need by setting them on a warm furnace or a store-bought heat mat. **DON'T** just place seeds next to a window. Place seedlings on a table directly underneath a shop light. These lights are usually enough to provide sturdy, stocky seedling growth. **DON'T** use fancy "grow lights." They are designed to help plants flower indoors, not sprout seedlings. Instead, use a cool white fluorescent tube light to give your seedlings an approximation of

the sun they need, which is a lot. Find them at any hardware store. **DO** keep seedlings close to the light—they should be almost touching the tubes. Adjust the distance between your herbs and the light. When seeds have to stretch for light, they become leggy and susceptible to garden damage. **DO** keep seed lights on at least 16 hours a day. **DO** water seeds moderately. Steer clear of watering too much or too little. **DO** cover unsprouted seedling trays with clear plastic to regulate moisture levels. —G.D.