

Growing alpinines from seed.

Why grow from seed?

For many people, raising alpinines from seed becomes a passion, and one of the most exciting aspects of the hobby. But why, you may ask, go to the trouble, when so many nurseries supply plants which can be bought in spring and planted straight out in the garden, for almost immediate effect? There are many good reasons:

- The average packet of seed will produce many young plants. You can experiment by planting these out in different parts of the garden; you will be very unlucky if some of them do not succeed!
- You can also swap the surplus with other growers in exchange for other different plants.
- Many alpinines vary from seed: in flower colour and size, height, compactness of cushions, floriferousness, and adaptability to different conditions.
- Every time you sow a batch of seed, there is the possibility of raising a superior form.
- Many rare and choice plants are only available as seed. Few average specialist nurseries will stock as many as 1000 different plants; many will stock far fewer. By contrast, the AGS Seed Distribution typically offers in excess of 5,500 different kinds each year.
- The AGS Seed Distribution also lists seed collected from the wild by members, and occasionally the AGS organizes seed collecting expeditions.

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Choosing seed.

While the raising of plants from seed takes a little longer, most of the time involved consists of the grower doing very little! To paraphrase Mrs. Beeton: 'First get your seed'. The selection of seed is an ideal pastime for the dark winter evenings. Browsing through *The Alpine Gardener* will give you ideas about the kinds of plant you would wish to grow. It is useful to make a list of these in case your memory fails you at a crucial time, or if you struggle with Latin names. The seed lists of the AGS and other specialist alpine societies usually arrive in December. This is where your list of wants comes in; you can quickly skim through and make your first selections. It can also be a good idea to choose one or two kinds which are totally unknown to you and do not appear in any of your alpine books. On occasion this can produce some rather strange and uninspiring things that you would rather not have, (but someone loved these things enough to collect and clean seed and donate it), on the other hand, you may raise some superb plants.

When to sow.

Once your seed has arrived, the question that arises is 'When do I sow it'. The simple answer is usually 'As soon as possible.' Although it is not always the case, the seed of many alpiners needs to be exposed to low temperatures for a time, before germination will take place. Even an average winter will usually provide sufficiently cold temperatures. If you delay sowing until later in the year, germination may not take place until the following winter or spring. In fact, when you begin to sow seed from your own plants it is a good idea to sow in early October, as some seed will germinate in the Autumn, as temperatures fall.

Gentiana acaulis

Composts.

For the majority of alpiners, a satisfactory seed compost can be made from John Innes Compost No.1 (3 parts by volume), and concreting sand (1 part). In some areas concreting sand is also known as grit sand or coarse sand. Other growers use 4 - 6 mm grit (quartzite or granite is best, even lime-loving plants seem to do well with it. For ericaceous plants (e.g. *Rhododendron*, *Cassiope*) and woodland plants, and those which need an acidic compost (e.g. *Trillium*, many *primulas*), a commercial ericaceous compost will do, and some growers use fine-grade composted bark.

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The type of pot used is unimportant, but many growers find that 7 or 9 cm square plastic pots are very convenient. These nest together so use minimum space, a block of pots is easy to water, they do not dry out as quickly as clay pots, and they will produce enough seedlings for all but the very largest garden. In spite of their specialist reputation, the majority of alpiners are very tough and adaptable, so the precise composition of your compost is less important than how well it drains when watered. Having mixed a compost, fill a pot to the top then firm the compost down gently. Next fill the pot to the top with water. If the water does not drain through rapidly the drainage is not good enough, so you need to add more grit or coarse sand.



Aster alpinus

Sowing seed.



Cyclamen hederifolium 'Ruby Strain'

If you have a large number of seeds to sow, it is convenient to do it on a production-line basis. Mix up a large batch of compost and fill as many pots as you have packets of seed. Firm the compost gently, to finish 2 cm or so below the rims of the pots. It is a good idea to write out a label before opening the seed packet. Most growers record the plant name, source of seed, date of sowing and perhaps the number of seeds if they are fairly large. A typical label might read: *Cyclamen hederifolium* 'Ruby Strain'. AGS 2154. Sown 15/12/05. 12S. Put the label in the pot first, and level the compost surface if necessary. If the seeds are large enough to handle individually, it is a good idea to space them uniformly across the pot. This will allow your seedlings to develop for a longer time before they need to be transplanted. Having sown the seed, many growers simply finish off the pot by applying a 1 - 2 cm layer of 4 - 6 mm grit. This no-nonsense approach seems to work well: the seeds obtain moisture from the compost, oxygen from the air through the open spaces in the grit, and the grit reduces the growth of mosses and liverworts which may overwhelm slow-growing plants.

For very fine seed, a slightly modified procedure works well. The grit is put onto the pot first, the fine seed is scattered on top of it, and is then washed down onto the compost by spraying with a hand mister, or by gentle watering. For fine seeds needing an acid compost, (see above), it is often sufficient to sow the seed on the surface of the compost, or at the most, apply a very thin sifting of compost. When all of the seed is sown, the pots are best watered by standing in a tray of water to about half of their depth, until the surface of the grit or compost becomes moist. The next stage consists of dynamically doing very little, and letting nature take its course.

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Cyclamen Hederifolium



Pots of alpine seed are best placed where they will experience cold weather, not in a frost-free greenhouse. An ideal location is a cold frame in a north-facing position, where the pots will not be quickly dried out by direct sun. If you have not got a cold frame, it is sufficient to just prop a pane of glass or plastic sheet over the pots to prevent heavy rain from washing your seeds away. The seed pots will only need to be inspected once a week or so for the first germinations. When these occur, it is a good idea to put down slug bait, or inspect the pots very frequently. Slugs and snails find young alpine seedlings very desirable and eat the very best things first!

Potting on.

Pots of young seedlings may be moved to a sunnier area, and given an occasional liquid feed to encourage progress. Many experienced growers leave bulb seedlings in the original pots for two years before transplanting. Faster-growing subjects will benefit from transplanting at the two seed-leaf stage, or as the first true leaf develops. Most alpinines make very large root systems. If left to grow on for too long the root systems can become deeply entangled, and you may cause much damage when teasing them apart. After transplanting, seedlings are best watered by standing the pots in water a few cm deep, then allowed to stand in a shady place until they begin to grow again.



Crocus vernus

Raising alpinines from seed is easy and fun. Although bulbs may take several years to reach flowering size, if you sow some seeds every year, there will always be something reaching flowering size for the first time. Good luck!

Collect all the Info leaflets and have a complete library of everything to do with growing, caring for and showing alpinines. If you need more information please call us or see our website.