



Toward 70%

I bought some seeds this week. Well, more than ‘some.’ Without going into specifics, let’s just say that if my seed packets were an alphabet, it wouldn’t end with Z. Don’t judge me. It could be worse; I once knew a guy who owned at least that many sets of golf clubs. I started to panic when counting, before realizing that at least some of them—the salad greens, the carrots, and some of the herbs—can be direct-sown, so won’t need to be started indoors.

Which is a very good thing, since indoors has become problematic. Last winter, I still hadn’t renovated my unspeakably horrible back room (if a space only 70 inches wide can even be called a ‘room’). The ceiling was falling down, the walls wore fake tile paneling, and the peel-and-stick floor was doing a lot of peeling but not much sticking. In short, it was a perfect spot for the messy process of starting seeds. But the room has been cleaned up, and as the person who applied all that pristine paint, I hesitate to set up shop anywhere near it. Alas, the alternative would be the basement, which would be a perfectly acceptable choice if only I didn’t have to go outside and around back in order to get back in again, in 20-degree weather. Rocks and hard places come to mind.

On a grey winter day, with seductive thoughts of next summer in my head, I couldn’t resist the racks of colorful packets, but it’s still way too soon to plant. One of the most common mistakes is to start seeds too early. Four to six weeks before the last frost date (May 1 for us) is ideal for most seeds; eight to ten weeks for the real slowpokes. Don’t be tempted to start them earlier: you think you’ll get larger, more mature plants, but the reality is you’ll end up with weak, spindly seedlings.

But while it’s too soon to plant, it’s just the right time to give some of my seeds special treatment, called stratification. This is just a fancy name for mimicking the natural conditions seeds require in order to germinate in the wild. Mine are a group of American wildflowers, native to the Northeast, so they need a few months of cold. There are several techniques for stratification. Some people dampen a paper towel, sprinkle on the seeds, fold it all up and seal in a plastic bag, and leave in the refrigerator for sixty days. Some substitute a bag filled with moistened seed starting mix. My refrigerator is always short on space, and it tends to grow penicillin more readily than wildflowers, so this year I’m trying a different strategy. I’m sowing my

seeds in soil mix in a row of nearly-decapitated milk jugs, and setting them outdoors to enjoy the remainder of a Connecticut winter. I'll let you know how it turns out.

You won't find many native plant seeds at big box stores, or even at most of the conventional nurseries. I bought mine online at Prairie Moon Nursery, which specializes in natives. Natureworks, in Northford, carries quite a few, but isn't open at this time of year. I encourage you to ask our local garden centers to expand their selection of natives. The folks at Town and Country and Ballek's are plant people, too, and if enough of us ask for more natives, I'm sure they'll be happy to stock them for us. If my project succeeds, I hope to offer some seedlings at the Garden Club's plant sale during the tag sale in May. Conservation groups and other garden clubs are also good sources for natives.

Why do I keep harping on native plants? Several years ago some biologists, notably Doug Tallamy, author of [Bringing Nature Home](#), realized just how dependent most insects are on the native plants with which they share a given ecosystem. They may be able to collect pollen and nectar from non-natives, but their immature next generation will feed only on the leaves of specific plants. Insect populations have been hammered by pesticides and habitat loss; one shocking German study estimated the loss at 75% of the entire insect population! They may not be pretty, but every one of these humble creatures has a role to play in pollinating our crops and serving as food for our birds and small animals. All of us need to avoid pesticides, and do our best to plant as many natives as we can manage. Dr. Tallamy suggests a goal of 70% natives to 30% other ornamentals. I'm not there yet, but as I choose plants going forward, I'm working toward that number.

Some gorgeous choices: Anemone (*anemone canadensis*); lupine (*thermopsis villosa*); foamflower (*tiarella cordifolia*); maidenhair fern (*adiantum pedatum*); Jacob's ladder (*polemonium reptans*); trillium (*trillium grandiflorum*); American coral bells (*heuchera americana*); milkweed (*asclepias incarnata*, *asclepias tuberosa*); cardinal flower (*lobelia cardinalis*); wild blue phlox (*phlox divaricata*); ironweed (*vernonia fasciculata*).