



Growing native milkweed plants from seeds

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1. Seed treatments before sowing - Milkweed seeds need to be rinsed in running water to clean away any fungus spores or bacteria. So, put the seeds in a small mesh bag or sprout jar in the kitchen sink and let the cool water bubble through the seeds for about 30 to 45 minutes (Figure 1A) and down the drain. This not only cleanses the seeds but lets them absorb water - the first step in the germination process.

Native plant seeds, including many milkweeds, are dormant and require a cold, moist period before they can germinate; this exposure happens naturally during winter. Stratification is a nursery term that describes the combined use of moisture and cold temperatures to overcome seed dormancy. Sandwich stratification is the best procedure for small amounts of seeds. Use a single sheet of industrial paper towel or a stack of kitchen towels and moisten it completely. The idea is “moist, but not wet”.

Spread seeds one layer deep on 1/4 of the moist paper towel. Fold the paper towel over the seeds (Figure 1B), and place the sandwich into a clear, plastic zip-lock type bag and put them into a refrigerator.

Check occasionally to ensure seeds are moist and not moldy. If mold develops, remove the sandwich, open it, and rinse the seeds under cool, running tap water. Wash out the zip-lock type bag with warm water and soap. Spread seeds onto a new stack of moistened paper towels, put the sandwich back into the bag, and refrigerate. Keep checking the seeds every week or so, and add moisture if necessary. Sow seeds after 6-8 weeks or when they begin to germinate (Figure 1C).

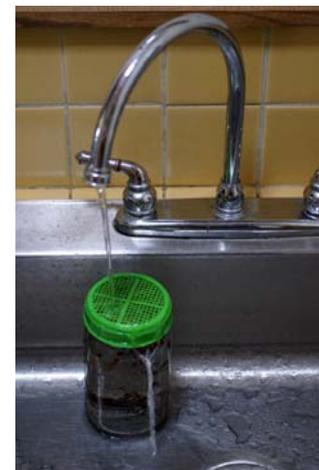


Figure 1A

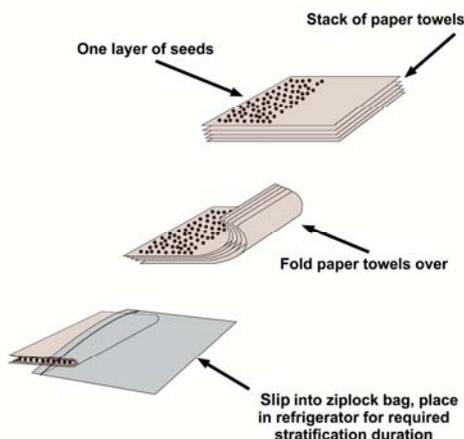


Figure 1B



Figure 1C

Figure 1 - Milkweed seeds need to be cleansed in a running water rinse (A), and then stratified under cold and moist conditions (B). Seed should be sown after a couple of months, or when they begin to sprout (C).

2. Sowing options for milkweed seeds

2.1 Direct seeding outside. You can plant milkweed seeds in the fall or early winter so that they will undergo natural stratification before germinating the following Spring. Sow directly in the soil or in containers. Milkweed seeds should be sown very shallow (less than ½ inch), and then mulched with a thin layer of sand or bark. To discourage birds or mice, the sown containers can be covered with a thin, white germination cloth which can be removed after the seedlings start to emerge in Spring.

2.2 Sowing seeds or germinants in containers. After 6-8 weeks of stratification, or when they begin to sprout, you can sow the seeds outside or in containers - plant 2 or 3 seeds in each spot or container (Figure 2A). When sowing germinants, just plant one and be sure to orient the new root downwards. Cover the seeds with a thin layer of fine-textured mulch or sand to protect the seed and hold it in place (Figure 2B). I've found that it's best to use stabilized media containers such as Jiffy pellets because young milkweed seedlings don't form a firm root plug right away. The stabilized media makes transplanting much easier (Figure 2C).



Figure 2A



Figure 2B



Figure 2C

Figure 2 - Plant milkweed seeds outdoors during the late Fall or Winter to allow for natural stratification (A). Cover seeds with a thin bark or sand mulch to protect seeds and conserve moisture (B). Stratified seeds can be sown in Jiffy pellets in the Spring (C), and then transplanted after the danger of frost is past.

3. Other tips - Plant in sunny locations. Milkweed plants can spread by rhizomes, so growing them in raised beds or large containers is best. Irrigation during the first season isn't absolutely necessary but will result in larger, healthier plants.