

Starting Native Plants from Seed

A practical demonstration for home gardeners

Christine Quist · North Arrow Nursery and Landscapes · Fall into Gardening 2026

Why grow native plants, and why from seed?

- **They look great!**
- **Connect fragmented ecosystems**
- **Climate resilient:** adapted to our wet winters and dry summers
- **Food source for pollinators**
- **Provenance and genetic diversity:** seed-grown plants vary more than cuttings, which helps populations adapt

Our example plant: common yarrow

- *Achillea millefolium*
- Drought-tolerant, long-blooming, a pollinator magnet
- No special seed treatment needed
- Spent seed heads are beautiful and provide habitat in winter. Leave some standing.

Where to collect seeds

Our own stock plants, grown and tended in our home garden for seed collection. **Seed Savers program:** we plant native plants in clients' gardens, collect their seeds, and clients save on future plants.

Collecting in the wild

- Public land: a permit is required
- Private land: get permission first
- Never collect rare species
- **No more than 5%** of the seed from any one plant, collecting from at least 10 widely spaced plants (Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team [GOERT], n.d.)
- **No more than 10%** of the available seed at a site; stop if others have already collected (North American Native Plant Society, n.d.)

Know your plant

The life cycle tells you when to collect. Seeds follow the blooms.

- **Annual:** grows, flowers, sets seed and dies in one year (sea blush, *Plectritis congesta*: blooms spring, collect early summer)
- **Perennial:** lives many years, setting seed each season; herbaceous and woody (yarrow: blooms summer, collect late summer–fall)
- **Biennial:** leaves in year one; flowers, sets seed and dies in year two

Collecting seed

- **Dry fruits:** shake out (Douglas aster, *Symphyotrichum subspicatum*)
- **Fleshy fruits:** clean off the pulp (bunchberry, *Cornus canadensis*)

Yarrow. *When:* late summer to fall, on a dry day. *Ready test:* touch the head; seeds gently fall off when ready. *How:* snip seed heads into a paper bag and label right away. *Tip:* put a fine-mesh bag over the seed head to catch the seeds.

Cleaning and storing

1. Dry on a plate or mesh screen for 1–2 weeks
2. Rub seed heads between your palms, or twist gently into a sieve
3. Label with species, location and date
4. Store dry seed in a paper envelope somewhere cool, dry and dark; a fridge at 2–5°C works well

Tips for hard-to-remove seed

- Shake in a plastic container with a few coins to separate seed from the pappus (asters)
- Press gently with a rolling pin on a baking sheet (self-heal)

Breaking dormancy

Treatment	Mimics	Example
Cold-moist stratification	Winter	Broad-leaved shooting star (<i>Primula hendersonii</i>)
Warm, then cold stratification	Summer, then winter	Kinnikinnick (<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i>)
Scarify or soak (hard seed coats)	Wear, fire, heavy rain	Lupines (<i>Lupinus</i> spp.)
No treatment	Ready to go	Yarrow

When to sow on Vancouver Island

- **Fall:** sow outdoors the species that need cold, and let winter do the work (shooting star, sea blush)
- **Winter:** store dry seed in the fridge. For cold stratification, mix seed with damp sand in a bag and refrigerate. Keep it separate from your food fridge!
- **Spring:** sow no-treatment seeds indoors or outdoors (yarrow)

Growing media

A growing media holds water, holds nutrients and provides root stability. **Good drainage is important.** Base mix: peat, perlite and sand. Other options: coco coir, pumice, fine bark, grit. Top with a thin layer of media or sand. **Where does the plant grow naturally?** Look at the surrounding environment and try to replicate those conditions.

Choose your method

- **Seed flat:** many seeds in one flat; gently tease apart or cut with a knife to separate

- **Plug tray:** one to many seeds per cell; less root disturbance at transplant
- **Garden sowing:** bare soil so seed makes good contact; sand mulch helps self-seeders

How to sow

How much seed? Check the propagation protocol, or do a germination test: put 10 seeds on a damp paper towel in a plastic bag, wait 7–14 days, and count. The lower the germination rate, the higher the sowing rate.

1. Fill the pot, seed flat or plug tray
2. Level: uniformity is key for water management
3. Firm gently to settle the media
4. Sow as per seeding rate
5. Cover 1–2 times the seed's length (a general guideline)
6. Label

Yarrow: sow on the surface and press in. Don't cover; seeds need light to germinate.

Water and label

- Water in from above; a gentle spray replicates rain
- In a greenhouse, mist to keep seeds from drying out
- Label with species, date and source
- Surface-sown seed like yarrow moves easily, so water in gently

Fall sowing outdoors

1. Sow in fall and set seed flats or pots outside
2. Rain and cold do the stratifying for you
3. Cover with mesh to keep critters out
4. Watch for sprouts in spring

What seeds need to germinate

Water, oxygen and temperature. Some seeds have special requests: light (yarrow!), darkness, or a cold or warm period first.

From germination to transplant

The seed swells with water, the root (radicle) emerges, the seed leaves (cotyledons) open, then the first true leaves appear (Seed Parade, 2023). Transplant when the first true leaves appear and the roots reach the sides of the pot.

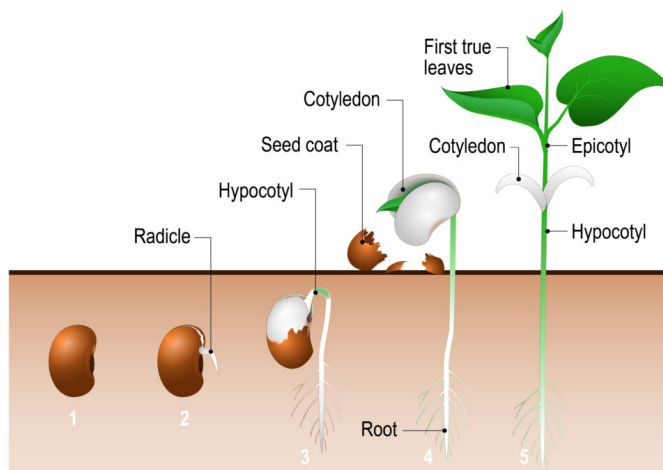


Figure adapted from Seed Parade (2023)

Growing on

1. Pot up from a plug tray or seed flat into a 4" pot
2. Harden off: prepare plants to move from indoors to outdoors
3. Plant out in spring or fall

Pot size: choose relative to the plug or block size. Not too large: the soil stays wet too long and new roots may rot.

More easy starters

Douglas aster (*Symphyotrichum subspicatum*) · self-heal (*Prunella vulgaris* var. *lanceolata*) · entire-leaved gumweed (*Grindelia integrifolia*) · nodding onion (*Allium cernuum*) · Roemer's fescue (*Festuca roemerii*) · junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*) · fringecup (*Tellima grandiflora*)

References

- Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team. (n.d.). *Collection guidelines*. Retrieved September 26, 2026, from <https://goert.ca/gardeners-restoration/propagation/collection-guidelines/>
- North American Native Plant Society. (n.d.). *Seed collecting*. Retrieved September 26, 2026, from <https://nanps.org/seed-collecting/>
- Seed Parade. (2023, August 26). *The process of germination*. <https://www.seedparade.co.uk/news/sowing/process-germination/>



A Year of Plant Propagation · Milner Gardens & Woodland

Community education courses. Seed propagation course runs in spring 2027.
Details coming early in the new year; sign up for their newsletter to stay informed.
Early sign-up access for volunteers and staff.

Seed sowing

Grafting
Layering
Division
Softwood cuttings
Semi-hardwood cuttings
Hardwood cuttings

