

A short guide to sowing cactus seeds.

What you will need.

1) Pots (6cm diameter are best)

2) Compost (soil and grit)

3) Seeds

4) Plastic food bags

5) Labels

6) Water

7) A sunny windowsill

8) Patience

9) Perseverance

This guide has been put together for the RHS Bridgewater CactusWorldLIVE! Event to help people who have never grown cacti & succulent seeds before. It is not intended to be exhaustive on the subject (many more pages could be written). Sowing cactus seeds is suitable for all ages, but children may need adult supervision .

I have been successful with this method and should you try it I hope you are too. Good luck!

Any sort of compost will do but for best results a John Innes type compost mixed gravel or grit is best. Ideally the gravel should be angular like a rock and not smooth like a pebble.



John Innes and Grit mixed 50% of each by volume

Do not try and grow seeds in just soil – it will become water logged.

Fill the pots with your compost mix and leave to soak in some water.

Once the pots have been soaking for about 20 minutes you can now think about sowing your seeds.

The packet of seeds you have are a mixture of cactus genera. Some of them will be *Gymnocalycium* species some of them will be *Notocactus* species. There may be an odd seed from another genus if you are lucky.



Gymnocalycium



Notocactus

Open a food bag and roll the top part down to make a little bowl shape for the pot to stand in. Stand the pot in the bag.



Seeds come in all shapes and sizes

Try and spread the seeds out evenly over the surface of the compost. Do not press the seeds into the compost unless they are really big. You can put more than one pot in a bag, just be careful they don't fall over.

Put two labels in the pot on opposite sides. This is to stop the bag from collapsing onto the seedlings.

Pull the bag up and tie with a knot. There should be some air in the bag, but not too much. Do not use wire ties – the bag must be air tight.



A tray with bags of containing pots of freshly sown seeds.

Repeat until all the seed packets have gone.



Bags on a sunny windowsill

Place the bags on a sunny windowsill.

Despite what you might think cacti seedling need to be in an enclosed humid environment to germinate and grow. Water trapped on the inside of the bag is a good sign that the environment is correctly working.

Wait.

After a few days you should hopefully see some small green specks.

Well done, you have your very own cactus seeds growing.



Freshly germinating seedlings

The seedlings can stay in the bag for many months. The seedlings should have spines and be large enough to handle before you even think of opening the bag.

Once the seedlings look like cacti and are at least 5mm in diameter they can come out of the bag. It is best to open the bag first and let them become accustomed to the drier air. The seedlings can be left in their original pot until they are crowded and touching each other – this can easily be 12 months or more. Allow them to dry out between watering but don't let them become too dry. If they are thirsty they won't grow!



Astrophytum seedlings

After that they can be potted on into either their own pot (if the root system is big enough) or a larger tray if the roots are still small. If you put them in their own pot then each pot should have its own label.



Seedlings in quarter trays



Seedling potted into its own pot

Use the same mix of compost as before.

After about 18 months you should have a nice collection of cacti seedlings growing.

Things to avoid.

Too much sun. Seedlings can burn very easily – a hint of red is not a problem, but a brown red, or worse translucent white is a bad sign and usually terminal.

Soggy compost. It should not be waterlogged. This would encourage moss to grow.

Peat based composts. Try and avoid using this as it is likely to encourage sciarid flies. These are little black flies whose larvae like to eat seedlings. If flies are spotted then a quick spray with normal fly spray will get rid of them. Repeat application as needed.

Trouble shooting

The bag should not be opened unless nothing is growing, the pots have seedlings in them, but they are really being swamped by moss or the pots have dried out. If you do open the bag for one of these reasons you cannot then re-seal the bag.

If there is too much moss allow the pot to dry out and then carefully remove the moss from the surface. The pot can then be re-soaked. If the pot has dried out then soak it in some luke warm water until the surface looks wet.

The Plug for the Society

If you have been successful (or indeed not successful) and would like to try growing more seeds (or cacti & succulent plants) then a good place to get seeds or plants is the British Cactus and Succulent Society.

More information about joining can be found here:

<https://society.bcsc.org.uk/>