

TRADITION • SELF-RELIANCE • PRACTICAL LIVING

GRANDPARENTS'

CRAFTS

old skills and household ways
for life today



GARDEN • PANTRY • BREAD • ANIMALS • HOME

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO A BETTER, HEALTHIER AND FREER LIFE

“Work done with love and purpose keeps a home alive.”



To the reader

This book gathers together household know-how, home crafts and habits that for a long time kept life in good order: the garden, the pantry, bread, animals, tools, mending, fire, wood and work well done.

This edition has been reshaped for the adult reader. We keep the warm voice of the countryside and the intergenerational spirit of the material, but set out the content as a practical reference guide, one to keep on the shelf and use while you work.

Where you come across the original age-based learning structure in the chapters, read it as a ladder of skill: 'First steps', 'Intermediate level' and 'Advanced level'. The book thus stays useful both to beginners and to those who want to go deeper.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Read chapter by chapter, choose something to make and go step by step. The book is meant for practice, not just for reading.

TAKE CARE

Fire, knives, lye, electricity, mushrooms and wild plants call for caution and, where needed, guidance from someone who knows.

This edition sets out to shed light on the order, self-reliance and practical memory of the household of days gone by.

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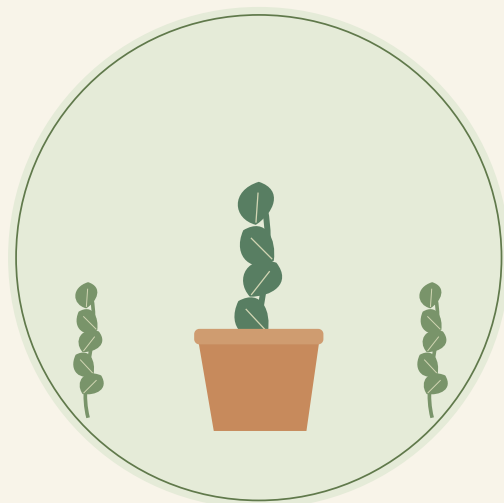
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GRANDPARENTS' CRAFTS

PART I OF VIII

The Garden



IN THIS PART

- Preparing the soil
- Beans, peas and squash
- Compost
- Watering and mulching
- Seeds and seedlings
- Friends and foes of the garden
- The garden calendar
- Saving seeds
- Tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers
- Fruit trees: planting and simple grafting
- Potatoes, onions and garlic

P

Preparing the soil

Autumn digging, spring raking and the beds that keep the garden in order.

BASIC LEVEL

FIRST STEPS

Soil is the plants' home. Before we sow seeds, we loosen it, which means we make it soft and fluffy, like a pillow. You can gather the stones and put them in the bucket. You can look for earthworms and put them back carefully, because they are our friends. You can hold the string when we mark out straight beds. And you can rake gently with your little rake.

FROM OUR GRANDPARENTS' MEMORIES

The clods the frost broke up

It was an October day, with mild sunshine and the smell of dry leaves. Grandpa called me round the back of the house, where the garden looked sad: dry bean vines, flattened maize stalks, yellowed weeds. "Today we put the garden to bed," he told me, and gave me a smaller spade, its handle polished by so many hands.

First we cleared away the remains. What was healthy we took to the compost, what was diseased we set aside. Then Grandpa crossed himself, spat on his palms as he always did, and drove in the spade. "See? As long as the blade is, that's how deep we dig. And we don't break up the clods. We leave them big, face up."

I was surprised. To me, good soil was smooth, like a carpet. Grandpa laughed. "Winter will bring the frost, and it will do the job better than us. The water in the clods freezes, swells and cracks them. In spring you touch them with the rake and they turn to flour."

We dug until evening fell. My palms ached and I had a blister. Grandpa showed me how to hold the handle, one hand low and one high, and how to push with your foot, not your back. We found heaps of earthworms and put them back in the furrow.

In March he called me again. I touched a clod with the tip of the rake and it fell apart like a cornmeal cake. Then I understood: the gardener doesn't do it all alone. He prepares, and God does the rest, through frost, rain and weather. Grandpa only said, "Thank you for this good winter." And we started on the beds.

Why it is good to know this: everything that grows in the garden depends on the soil. Loose soil lets roots go deep, holds water like a sponge and takes in the air that both roots and the small creatures in the soil need. Anyone who can prepare a patch of ground themselves can have fresh vegetables anywhere: in a country yard, in a garden by a block of flats or in a few boxes on a small plot. And digging teaches patience and the rhythm of work: not everything gets done in a day, but a little at a time, at the right moment.

What we need

- a spade for an adult and a smaller one for a child
- a digging fork for heavy or root-filled soil
- an iron rake and a small rake for the little ones
- a hoe for weeding and for drawing drills
- a bucket for stones and a wheelbarrow
- string and two pegs, plus a board or a tape measure
- well-rotted manure (at least a year old) or compost
- work gloves, closed shoes, a hat
- a jar with a lid and water, for the soil test

Step by step: know your soil

1. The fist test: take a handful of slightly damp soil and squeeze it. If it sticks like modelling clay and stays a shiny lump, it is clay soil (heavy). If it runs through your fingers like sand, it is sandy (light). If it forms a ball that crumbles when you touch it with a finger, it is good, sandy loam soil.
2. The jar test: fill a jar a third full with stone-free soil, add water almost to the top, put the lid on and shake for 2–3 minutes. Leave it undisturbed for 1–2 days (the fine clay settles last). Sand settles at the bottom, silt in the middle, clay on top, and plant debris floats above. That way you see for yourself what your soil is made of.

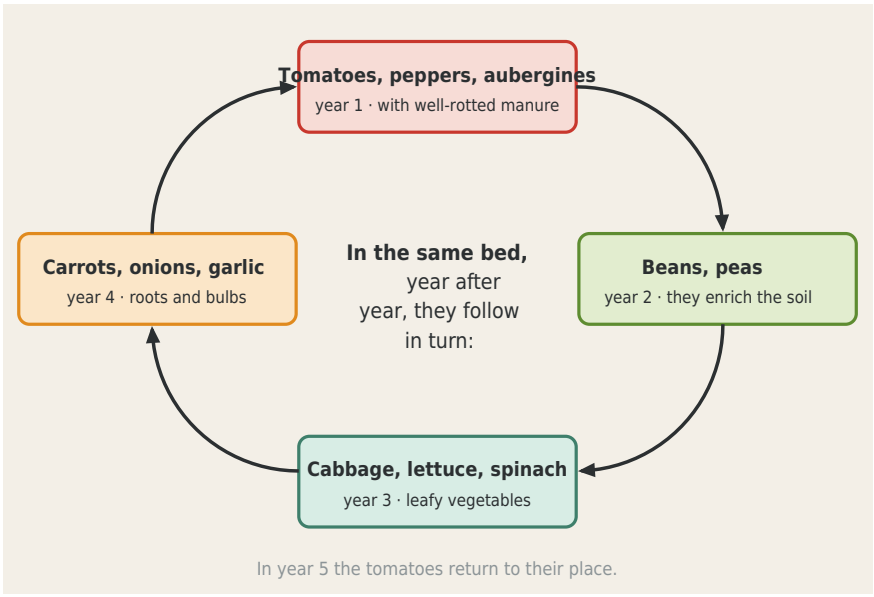
3. The earthworm test: dig a hole as deep as the spade blade and count the worms. If you find 5 or more, the soil is alive and healthy. If you find none, it needs compost and well-rotted manure.
4. The wetness test: never work the soil when it is sticky and clings to your boots. Wait 2-3 days after heavy rain. Soil worked wet turns to brick.

Step by step: autumn digging

1. In October-November, once you have brought in the harvest, gather up the plant remains. Healthy ones go on the compost; diseased ones (with blight or spots) are taken out of the garden.
2. Spread well-rotted manure or compost: about 4-6 kg per square metre, that is a full 10-litre bucket on each square metre. Fresh manure is not put on beds meant for root crops.
3. Dig to the depth of the blade, about 25-30 cm. Hold the handle with one hand high and one low, push the blade in with your foot, lift the clod and turn it face down, to bury the manure and small weeds.
4. Leave the big clods unbroken. Over winter, the frost will crack them.
5. Use the fork to lift couch grass and bindweed roots, as whole as possible; every forgotten scrap grows back.
6. Work one narrow strip at a time, 1-2 metres wide, then rest. For a child of 8-10, 15-20 minutes of digging is enough.

Step by step: spring beds

1. In March-April, when the soil no longer sticks to your tools, rake the whole area. The clods crumble easily, and you gather the stones into the bucket.
2. Drive in two pegs and stretch the string. Mark out beds 1-1.2 m wide, so you can reach the middle from both sides without stepping on them. Choose the length to suit the garden.
3. Leave paths of 30-40 cm between the beds. Step on the path, never on the bed. That way the soil in the bed stays loose all year.
4. Raise the beds slightly, 10-15 cm above the path, by drawing soil up from the path with the hoe. In heavy, wet soils, a raised bed dries out faster and warms up sooner.
5. Smooth the surface of the bed with the back of the rake, so it is level, with no hollows where water can pool.
6. Write on a small sign what you put in each bed and note it in a notebook. Next year you won't put the same plant in the same place (see the table below).



Four-bed rotation: in the same place, the plants take their turn, year after year.

Year	Bed 1	Bed 2	Bed 3	Bed 4
Year 1	tomatoes, peppers, aubergines	beans, peas	cabbage, lettuce, spinach	carrots, onions, garlic
Year 2	beans, peas	cabbage, lettuce, spinach	carrots, onions, garlic	tomatoes, peppers, aubergines
Year 3	cabbage, lettuce, spinach	carrots, onions, garlic	tomatoes, peppers, aubergines	beans, peas
Year 4	carrots, onions, garlic	tomatoes, peppers, aubergines	beans, peas	cabbage, lettuce, spinach

TAKE CARE

Take care: tools are always laid down with their teeth and blades facing down. A rake left on the ground teeth up can badly injure a foot or, if you step on it, the handle flies up at you. Small children work only with small tools and with an adult beside them, at a distance from the person digging (at least two handle lengths). Wear closed shoes, not sandals. Any scratch with soil in it is washed well with soap and water, and parents check that the child's tetanus vaccination is up to date. After working with manure, wash your hands well before eating. Don't lift heavy loads: a child carries half-full buckets.

GRANDMA'S ADVICE

Grandma's advice: don't give a child a big piece of the garden. Give them a bed of their own, one metre by one metre, with their own name sign. They dig it, rake it, sow it and tend it alone, and you only advise. What is theirs hurts them and delights them. Show them how to hold the tool, then let them make a few mistakes; the hand learns better than the ear. And finish the work with a glass of cold water and a thank-you.

PRACTICAL TASK · BASIC LEVEL

Gathers stones and pulled weeds, looks for and moves earthworms, holds the string, rakes with the small rake, carries small buckets of compost, does the jar test with you.

PRACTICAL TASK · INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

Digs a small strip with their own spade, rakes a whole bed, marks out beds with string and tape measure, does the fist and earthworm tests and records the bed plan in a notebook.

PRACTICAL TASK · ADVANCED LEVEL

Digs a bed alone to the depth of the blade, spreads the right amount of manure, draws up the four-year rotation plan and can lead younger siblings' work, with an adult nearby.

PROJECT OF THE WEEK

- Do the jar test with soil from two different spots in the yard and draw the layers that settled.
- Prepare your own bed, 1 m by 1 m: clear it, dig it, rake it and give it a name sign.
- Draw the garden plan in your notebook, with beds and paths, and write what will grow in each this year.

I CAN... (TICK)

- I can tell heavy, light and good soil apart with the fist test.
- I can hold the spade and rake correctly and lay them down teeth down.
- I know why we don't break up the clods in autumn.
- I can mark out a straight bed with string and leave a path between beds.
- I know why we don't put the same plant in the same place every year.

AN OLD SAYING

"The soil doesn't lie: what you give it, it gives you back."

C

Compost

How we turn peelings, leaves and straw into the best soil on the homestead.

BASIC LEVEL**FIRST STEPS**

Compost is a heap where kitchen and garden scraps slowly turn into good black soil. Earthworms work there, and creatures so tiny we can't see them. You can take potato and apple peelings to the compost. You can gather dry leaves in autumn. And you can look for the red worms that live there.

FROM OUR GRANDPARENTS' MEMORIES**The smoking heap**

One November morning, going out with Grandma to the hens, I saw smoke coming from the corner of the garden. I got scared and shouted, "Grandma, the rubbish is on fire!" Grandma laughed so hard she dropped the bowl of grain.

She took me by the hand and we went to the compost heap. There was no fire at all. It was steam, like from a pot of soup. Grandma drove in the fork, turned over a chunk and told me to put my gloved hand into the middle. It was warm, almost hot. Outside there was frost on the grass, yet that heap was shimmering with heat.

"You see, a whole army of little workers is busy here, ones you can't see with your eyes. They eat the scraps and, as they eat, they warm up. Like you when you run."

Then she showed me the old part of the heap, made a year before. There were no more peelings, leaves or straw there. It was black, crumbly soil that smelled like the forest after rain. "This is the garden's gold. You can't buy it anywhere. You make it from what others throw away."

From then on, not a single peeling in our house went in the bin. We had a lidded pot by the door, and in the evening someone took it to the heap. Most often, me. Grandma said the soil that feeds us must be fed too, and that nothing God has given goes to waste in a good household. In spring, when we put in the seedlings with a handful of compost in each hole, I felt like a wizard making soil out of nothing.



A compost bin made from pallets, with gappy sides to let the air in.

Photo: cogdogblog, CCO 1.0, via Flickr

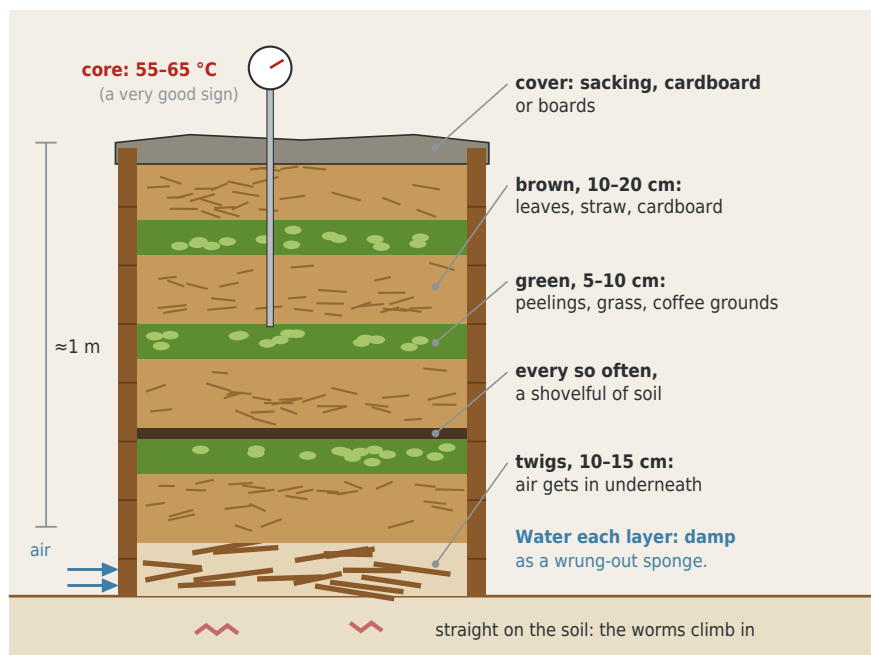
Why it is good to know this: compost turns scraps into food for the garden, with no money and no bought fertiliser. It makes heavy soil looser and sandy soil better at holding water. Household rubbish drops a great deal, because much of what we throw out is vegetable and fruit scraps. And the child learns, with their own eyes, one of the loveliest lessons: in nature nothing is lost, everything returns to the soil and becomes new life.

What we need

- a spot in shade or half-shade, on soil (not concrete), at least 10 m from the well
- a bin made of boards or pallets, about 1 m long, 1 m wide and 1 m high, with gaps for air; ideally two bins side by side
- a fork for turning
- a lidded pot in the kitchen for scraps
- green materials: vegetable and fruit peelings, grass cuttings, weeds without seeds, coffee grounds, tea leaves
- brown materials: dry leaves, straw, chopped twigs, torn plain cardboard (not glossy and without sticky tape), sawdust from untreated wood
- a watering can, gloves, a piece of sacking or cardboard for covering

Step by step: building the heap

1. Choose the spot: in the shade, so it doesn't dry out, but close at hand, so you're not too lazy to take the scraps. Stand the bin directly on the soil, so the earthworms can climb into it.
2. Lay a 10–15 cm layer of twigs or thick stalks on the bottom, so air can get in underneath.
3. Add alternating layers: a layer of green (5–10 cm), then a layer of brown (10–20 cm). The old rule: one part green to two or three parts brown, measured by the bucket.
4. Every so often sprinkle in a shovelful of garden soil or old compost; that brings in the little workers who get things going.
5. Water each layer until it is as damp as a wrung-out sponge: if you squeeze a handful, one drop at most comes out.
6. Cover the heap with sacking, cardboard or boards, so it doesn't dry out in summer or get waterlogged in autumn.
7. Cut large scraps into small pieces; the smaller they are, the faster they turn into compost.



The compost heap in cross-section: layers of green and brown, with twigs at the bottom.

Step by step: care and harvesting

1. Every 2-4 weeks, turn the heap with the fork: move what was at the edges into the middle. That lets air in and speeds things up.
2. If it smells bad, like rotten eggs, it is too wet or has too much green: add dry leaves or straw and turn it.
3. If it is dry and nothing is happening, add fresh grass and water.
4. If the middle is warm, even hot (55-65 degrees), that's a very good sign. A big, well-made heap warms up within a few days.
5. After 6-12 months, the compost is ready: blackish-brown, crumbly, smelling of the forest. You can no longer recognise what you put in.
6. Sieve it through a riddle with 1-2 cm holes. What stays in the sieve goes back into the new heap.
7. Use it: a handful or two in each hole for seedlings, 2-3 cm spread over the beds in spring, or mixed into soil for pots and boxes (about a third).

YES, it goes on the compost **NO, it doesn't go on the compost**

vegetable and fruit peelings meat, bones, fish

YES, it goes on the compost		NO, it doesn't go on the compost	
crushed eggshells		milk, cheese, butter, oil, greasy cooked food	
coffee grounds and tea leaves		dog or cat droppings	
leaves, straw, grass cuttings		diseased plants (with blight, rot)	
plain cardboard and uncoloured paper		weeds with seeds, couch grass and bindweed roots	
manure from hens, cows, horses, rabbits		coal ash, painted or treated wood	
chopped twigs		plastic, glass, metal, large amounts of citrus peel	

TAKE CARE

Take care: work on the compost only in gloves and wash your hands well with soap and water afterwards, especially before eating; compost and manure also harbour germs that are bad for people. Don't add dog, cat or human droppings, or meat and dairy: they bring rats and dangerous germs. Little ones don't hold the fork; its tines are sharp and it is used only well away from other children. Keep your face away when turning dry, dusty compost (don't breathe in the dust). Old heaps may hide wasps, mice or, rarely, a snake: a child never puts a bare hand where they can't see.

GRANDMA'S ADVICE

Grandma's advice: make taking scraps to the compost the child's job, like feeding the hens. Give them their own lidded pot and let them decide what goes in and what doesn't, using the table stuck on the pantry door. Have them put the kitchen thermometer (or a gloved hand) into the middle of the heap and note the heat once a week. When the compost is ready, let them sieve it and be the first to take it to the seedlings: then they understand what they worked for all year.

PRACTICAL TASK · BASIC LEVEL

Takes the peelings pot to the heap with an adult, gathers dry leaves, tears cardboard into small pieces, looks for red worms, helps water with the small watering can.

PRACTICAL TASK · INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

Chooses alone what goes on the compost using the table, lays the green and brown layers, does the sponge test, measures the heap's heat and keeps a notebook of observations.

PRACTICAL TASK · ADVANCED LEVEL

Builds the pallet bin with an adult, turns the heap with the fork, solves problems alone (smell, dryness), sieves the compost and shares it out over the beds.

PROJECT OF THE WEEK

- Put a lidded pot for scraps in the kitchen and take it to the compost every day for a week. Note how many pots you took.
- Do the sponge test and the heat test on your heap and write down what you found.
- In a corner of the garden, bury an apple peel, a leaf and a piece of plastic bag. After a month, dig them up and see what has happened to each.

I CAN... (TICK)

- I know what goes on the compost and what doesn't.
- I can lay green and brown layers in the right proportion.
- I can do the sponge test for dampness.
- I know what to do if the heap smells bad or is too dry.
- I know how finished compost looks and smells.

AN OLD SAYING

"In a good household nothing is thrown away: what comes out of the earth goes back to the earth."

S

Seeds and seedlings

How we start plants indoors, on the windowsill, and get them ready for the garden.

BASIC LEVEL

FIRST STEPS

A seed is like an egg: inside, a little plant is sleeping. If we give it soil, water and warmth, it wakes up. You can fill the pots with soil. You can push in big seeds, like beans and pumpkin, with your little finger. You can spray them with the mister every morning and count the new leaves.

FROM OUR GRANDPARENTS' MEMORIES

The windowsill garden

At my grandparents', the end of February had a particular smell: warm soil brought up from the cellar. Grandpa sieved the soil and compost through an old riddle, and I held the basin. Along the kitchen's south-facing windowsill stood wooden trays, cut-down milk cartons and pots with names written on bits of wood.

From a tin box Grandpa took out the packets of seeds saved in autumn. On each one he had written in indelible pencil: "Ox-heart tomatoes, from Aunt Veta", "Bell pepper, our own". The tomato seeds were like tiny hairy scales. Grandpa put them on white paper and let me place them with the tip of a toothpick, two fingers apart.

"Don't bury them deep. A small seed wants a thin quilt. A big one wants a thick one." Over them he sieved a layer of soil as thick as a pencil, then sprinkled them with a brush dipped in water, so as not to wash them away.

Every morning before school I lifted the pane of glass off the tray and looked. Six days, nothing. On the seventh day the soil had risen into little humps, and out of them came green loops, bent over like people bowing. I ran to wake Grandpa. He came in his long johns, glasses on his forehead, looked and said, "Thank God, they've come up."

Then he told me the hardest thing: that out of a hundred seedlings we keep only the strongest, and that we must turn them to the light every day so they don't grow crooked. The garden starts on the windowsill, with plenty of patience, long before spring.



Seedlings just out of the soil, still bent over, "like people bowing".

Photo: grabadonut, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Flickr

Why it is good to know this: many vegetables, such as tomatoes, peppers and aubergines, need a long, warm summer. In Romania, if you sowed them straight into the garden in May, they wouldn't have time to crop well before the first frosts. That is why we start them indoors 6–10 weeks earlier. Anyone who can raise their own seedlings doesn't depend on the market, can keep the family's old varieties and can have healthy plants, grown without haste. And nothing teaches a child patience and care better

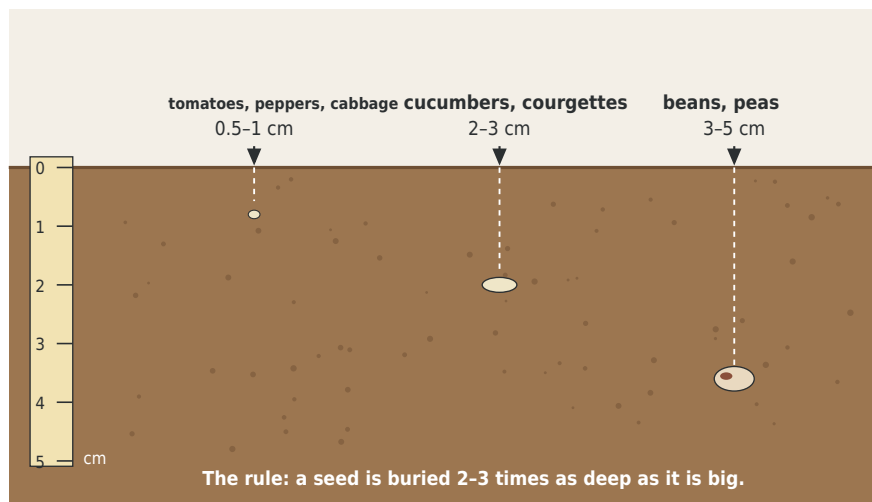
than a plant they have watched come out of a seed.

What we need

- trays or pots with holes in the bottom, or reused milk cartons and cups, with holes made in them
- trays underneath for the water that drains out
- seedling mix: one part sieved garden soil, one part sieved well-made compost and one part washed sand
- seeds (ideally saved by you or from neighbours, of old varieties)
- a mister or a watering can with a fine rose
- a pane of glass, plastic film or a clear lid
- labels and a pencil, for name and date
- a sunny (south-facing) window, in a room at 18–24 degrees

Step by step: sowing indoors

1. Fill the trays with damp mix, press it down gently with your palm so it is level, and leave 1–2 cm below the rim.
2. Small seeds (tomatoes, peppers, aubergines, cabbage) go 1–2 cm apart, or 2–3 to a small pot. Cover them with a thin layer of sieved soil: 0.5–1 cm. The golden rule: a seed is buried 2–3 times as deep as it is big.
3. Big seeds (cucumbers, courgettes, pumpkins) go 2 to a pot of 8–10 cm, 2 cm deep, 3–4 weeks before planting out, not earlier.
4. Spray with the mister, so as not to move the seeds. Put the glass or film on top to keep the moisture in.
5. Keep the trays warm. Tomatoes come up in 6–10 days at 20–25 degrees, peppers in 10–20 days at 25–28 degrees. Near the stove or radiator, but not on it.
6. Write the variety and sowing date on the label.



How deep the seed goes: a small one under a thin quilt, a big one under a thick one.

Step by step: caring for seedlings

1. As soon as they come up, take off the film and move the trays to the brightest window, at 16-20 degrees. Too much warmth and too little light make long, thin seedlings that flop over.
2. Give the trays a half turn every day so they don't grow crooked towards the glass.
3. Water when the soil surface feels dry, a little, in the morning, with room-temperature water. Lots of cold water brings damping off (they rot at the base).
4. Pricking out: when the plants have 1-2 true leaves (those that look like the grown plant's leaf, not the first two rounded ones), move each into its own little pot. Hold them by a leaf, never by the stem, and lift them out with a teaspoon. Tomatoes can be buried deeper, up to the lowest leaves.
5. After pricking out, keep them in light shade for 2-3 days, then back in the light.
6. Hardening off: 7-10 days before planting, take the pots outside, sheltered from the wind. On the first day 1-2 hours in the shade, then longer and longer, until they stay out at night too, unless it is colder than 10 degrees.
7. Plant out in the garden a short, sturdy, dark green seedling with 5-8 leaves, once the danger of frost has passed (see the calendar).

Plant	Sown indoors	Depth	Comes up in	Planted out
Tomatoes	end of February - March	0.5-1 cm	6-10 days	after 10-15 May (lowlands: from late April)
Peppers	February - early March	0.5-1 cm	10-20 days	after 15 May
Aubergines	February - early March	0.5-1 cm	10-15 days	after 15 May
Early cabbage	February	1 cm	5-8 days	April
Cucumbers	end of April	2 cm	4-7 days	after 15 May
Courgettes	end of April	2-3 cm	5-8 days	after 15 May

TAKE CARE

Take care: some bought seeds are treated (they have an unnatural pink, blue or green colour); little ones must not touch these with bare hands or put them in their mouths, and they are kept away from animals. Seeds in general are not for eating, and raw bean seeds are actually toxic. Trays with water are not put on electric heaters or near sockets. Scissors and knives for cutting cartons are used by an adult, or by a child over 10 under an adult's eye.

GRANDMA'S ADVICE

Grandma's advice: let the child sow beans alone in a clear glass, with cotton wool or wet paper round the side: they will see the root grow down and the stem grow up. Then give them a few pots of tomatoes to look after, with their name on them. Have them note in a notebook the day they came up and draw the plant once a week. When a few seedlings die, don't scold: tell them Grandpa lost plenty too before he learned.

PRACTICAL TASK · BASIC LEVEL

Fills pots with soil, pushes in big seeds with a finger, sprays with the mister, counts the plants that have come up and turns them to the light.