

Collecting and Sowing Arable Plant Species

This guidance notes provides some information about collecting and sowing individual species. Seed should always be collected in a paper-bag or envelope to keep it dry (and always collect in dry weather). Always collect different species separately, and don't mix them up in the same bag/envelope.

Night-flowering Catchfly

The seed pods of Night-flowering Catchfly open at the top and seed can be collected by being shaken over a container or being picked apart if the seed becomes trapped inside.

Initially, we've had little of this seed available, so sowed it in pots. It germinates in spring, so sowing in around late March or early April will reduce the risk of any seeds dying over winter. We found that seed stored in a mini seed-bank germinated well after a winter in storage. Seedlings were sown into an allotment bed, but suffered badly from slug damage and required protection from slugs and snails.



Red Hemp-nettle seedlings, in March, following the sowing of 100 seeds in this pot the previous autumn
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Red Hemp-nettle

Red Hemp-nettle seeds (just four per flower) sit loosely in the calyx, and the best collection method seems to be to carefully bend over flower-head and shake it over a receptacle once it looks like some ripe seeds are present. Any ripe seeds will drop out easily.

Although this is a spring-germinating species, there is a suggestion that it may need to be exposed to seasonal temperature variations to weaken the hard seed-coat and enable germination. We therefore sowed the seeds in pots in autumn, and found around a 30% germination rate from seed gathered the previous summer (higher than the 5% germination rate which has been found when sowing in spring). Seed was covered in a thin layer of gravel, rather than soil, to mimic the gravel habitats where the plant sometimes grows, though we didn't compare this to seeds sowed under a layer of soil.

Corn Buttercup

Corn Buttercup holds the seeds on the old flower-stalk, and you have to get them after they've ripened (ripe seeds are brown) and dried but before they drop. This means regular checking for ripe seeds.

This is an autumn-germinating species, so should be sown in September or October. If sown in pots, these should be left outside over the winter, before planting-out in spring. We found that it germinated fairly readily in a seed-bed as well as in pots.



Corn Buttercup seedlings, in March, following the sowing of 50 seeds in this pot the previous autumn
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Henbane

We have grown this successfully from seeds gathered from a dead plant at the end of December. These were sown in a pot in the spring. The plants flowered the following summer, although the plant is described as a biennial. Note that Henbane plants are highly poisonous and it is said that the scent of the flowers can cause giddiness – so handle with care.

Weasel's-snout

Ripe seed is shed through small holes that open in the seed pods. Seed can be collected by being shaken over a container or being picked apart if the seed becomes trapped inside.

We sowed this in pots in spring, as it is a spring-germinating species, and found good rates of germination from seed gathered the previous year and stored in a mini seed-bank. After establishing a few plants in an allotment bed a few years back, we have found that weasel's-snout self-seeds very well each year, with new plants popping up in spring and early summer. The only problem we have had was with either rabbits or voles eating the developing seed-pods, for which the only solution seemed to be using wire-netting.



Wild Pansy

In Wild Pansy, the valves of the seed-pod open and the seed quickly drops, In this case, regular checking is needed to spot open seed-pods before they drop their seeds.

Apparently, seeds germinate in both spring and autumn. We've had great success with seed stored in a mini seed-bank over winter, and then sown in pots in the spring. The seeds drop quickly after the seed-pods open, so growing on some plants in pots in the garden (where they can be more easily checked for ripe seed-pods) has proved an effective way to increase the amount of available seed.

Wild Pansy © Cath Shellswell

Corncockle

Corncockle has pods that dry and break open. Seed can be collected by being shaken over a container or being picked apart if the seed becomes trapped inside (which seems to often be the case with Corncockle).

Seeds germinate in autumn, and do so readily, even after a few years of storage in a mini seed-bank. They also self-seed readily in the allotment – just dig the area over in autumn to provide the necessary bare ground.

Interrupted Brome

Interrupted Brome holds onto its seed-heads well after the plants have died and dried up. The heads can then be picked, and the individual seeds separated out.



Corncockle seedlings in an allotment bed, in March, following sowing the previous autumn

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