



Reading Seed Packets

Seeds are typically the most affordable option for gardening but take some experience and know-how to grow them well. If you are new to gardening or wonder what some of the instructions on your seed packet are about, then this post will take through the frequent information found on store bought seeds.

Determine when to plant.

Instructions vary by brand, so some may indicate a timeframe based on location or hardiness zones, or they may refer to the last frost. Cities within 30 miles of Puget Sound (except Olympia) are typically zone 8b, which means that the coldest temperature we probably will ever get is 15 F. Towns closer to the Cascades are usually 8a or lower. You can look up your hardiness zone here: <https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/>. You can use your known hardiness zone to determine when to plant seeds if your packet does not say. The *last frost* refers to the last day that a region experiences freezing temperatures before spring. If you are planting in the late summer or fall, then you will want to pay attention to the *first frost*, when temperatures start to dip below freezing.

Planting depth.

If you do not pay attention to this your plants may not grow. As a rule of thumb, small seeds are sown shallow and large seeds are sown deeper. When seeding with kids, I like to use a ruler to mark a wooden dowel or popsicle stick with the depth that your seeds need.

Spacing. In my experience, kids like to try and use every seed in the packet, but that may not be the case if you space them properly. If you plant seeds too close, then the plants will focus their energy on growing leaves to outcompete their neighbors for sunlight instead of making produce. Your packet will list two numbers for spacing, the smaller is spacing between seeds in the same row, and the larger is the space between rows. If you are planting in pots, you only need to pay attention to the space between seeds.

Germination (or days to germ).

Germination is the process of a seed sprouting. When conditions are right, you should see sprouts after seeding soon after the timeframe listed on your packet. Some seeds germinate faster than others, so if you have younger children consider finding seeds that will germinate relatively quickly, like beans or radishes, to keep them engaged.

Thinning

Some packets will have instructions to thin after an amount of time or when plants are a certain height. Thinning is essentially moving plants further away from each other so that they have enough room to grow or throwing out the weak looking sprouts. You could transplant sprouts in a bed or move them to a larger pot.

Days to harvest/bloom.

This denotes how many days after planting you can expect to harvest produce or see a fully formed flower after seeding. Consider marking this time frame in your calendar or in a journal so your kids can keep track of how accurate the packet was for your specific home region.

Full sun/partial shade/full shade.

Found on some packets, this is a matter of knowing your planting area. Plants that need full sun should be put in an area that gets at least 4 hours of direct sun a day, partial shade needs 1-4 hours of sun, and full shade should be put in an area that get almost no direct sunlight, usually underneath a larger plant. It may help to know that the south side of a place gets the most sun and the north side gets the least.