



OCTOBER GROW GUIDE

the joy of autumn seed sowing with Milli Proust

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Many of you are most likely experts in managing the different seed sowing windows, but personally I have not yet really gone for autumn sowing of either veg or flowers. After the first season of our glorious new cutting garden at our HQ, we thought we needed to expand our growing confidence a little, and who better to guide us than Milli Proust, gardener, florist and author, who runs Alma | Proust with fellow grower Paris Alma. A trip to their new HQ and flower fields, only planted this year, has given us lots to share!

MEET MILLI AND PARIS

Milli Proust started her flower farm in 2017, and after two seasons of growing flowers, began selling seed in autumn 2018. In 2022, she joined forces with Paris Alma to form Alma | Proust, bringing together their experience of growing and floristry, a shared fascination with plants, and a love of flowers with beautiful colour, form and movement.

Together, they grow flowers and produce a carefully considered collection of seeds for everyone from professional florists to enthusiastic home gardeners. Milli's love of sowing and Paris's eye for picking and arranging flowers make a wonderful combination. And, of course, they share a particular love of sweet peas!



www.almaproust.com

Around 70% of the seed Alma | Proust offers is grown by Milli and Paris themselves. This is unusual: many seed companies source their seed from specialist growers, rather than growing it themselves. Alma | Proust is one of only three seed businesses of a comparable scale that they know of growing their own seed. For Milli and Paris, that means following the whole growing cycle, from sowing and nurturing the plants to harvesting, cleaning and packing the seed. Milli also creates the illustrations for their packets, bringing flowers they know intimately onto the paper.



Milli & Paris are also united by a love of sweet peas and who can blame them!

THE JOY OF GROWING FROM SEED

Growing from seed offers a particular kind of connection to a garden. You follow a plant from its first emergence through to flowering, learning what it needs along the way.

A few packets hold the possibility of so much colour and abundance, and there is real pleasure in watching that possibility take shape. Looking each day for the first sign of a seedling pushing through the compost is especially wonderful at a time of year when much of the garden is beginning to settle down for winter.

WHY SOW IN AUTUMN?

- Autumn sowing gives suitable hardy annuals a head start for the following year. Sown while conditions still allow germination and growth, they can establish before winter and begin growing again as spring arrives, often flowering earlier than spring-sown plants.
- An unheated greenhouse or cold frame offers useful protection over winter, although young plants still need attention during severe weather.
- Some seeds germinate best in cooler conditions, while others benefit from a period of chilling, known as cold stratification. These are different processes, so always check the requirements of each variety.
- Autumn sowing can give plants time to develop strong root systems before their main growing season.
- It also helps spread the workload, giving you another opportunity to sow alongside your spring sowings.
- Milli describes autumn sowing as a way of hedging your bets, particularly as summers become hotter and more intense. Earlier flowers can bring colour to the garden in May and June, before the summer bloomers arrive.

WHAT CAN WE SOW?

Knowing which seeds are suitable for autumn sowing is an important place to start. Look for varieties described as hardy annuals, and always check the sowing instructions on the packet. The RHS hardiness ratings can also be a useful guide to how established plants tolerate cold. For example, H4 indicates a plant that is hardy through an average winter in most of the UK. However, these ratings don't necessarily tell us whether newly germinated seedlings will survive winter in trays or pots, so providing suitable protection is still important.

Some of Milli and Paris's favourites for autumn sowing include **sweet peas, cornflowers, corncockle, larkspur, nigella, orlaya, ammi, calendula, cerinthe, annual poppies, annual scabious and the nodding grass *Briza maxima***. Together, they offer scent, colour, delicate flowers, useful foliage and beautiful seed heads. Check each packet for its preferred sowing conditions, and give young plants protection through winter.

HOW TO SOW

- Always check the instructions on the back of the seed packet. Even small differences in sowing conditions can affect germination success.
- Milli's book, *The Grower's Guide: Seeds*, is a wonderful resource, explaining the process from sowing and germination through to growing on. It includes a helpful chart detailing the conditions different seeds need, including temperature and light.
- Sow in small seed trays or modules so you aren't tempted to overdo it!
- Gently firm the compost before sowing to give the seeds good contact with the growing medium.
- Sow at the recommended depth, following the instructions for each variety.
- Don't automatically cover every seed with compost. Some need light to germinate, while others require darkness.
- Some seeds, such as phlox, need darkness to germinate. Milli suggests covering them with a piece of cardboard or placing them somewhere dark, while remembering to check moisture levels. Remove any covering as soon as seedlings emerge and move them into good light.
- Larkspur often germinates well in cool conditions, but this shouldn't be confused with cold stratification, which is a specific chilling treatment used to improve germination in certain seeds. Always follow the advice for the particular variety.



WATERING SEEDS

- Seeds need consistent moisture to germinate. If the compost is too wet, seeds may rot; if it's too dry, they may struggle to germinate.
- If using a seed tray, Milli recommends watering from underneath initially.
- Let the compost absorb the water, then remove the tray so the seedlings aren't left sitting in water.
- Once seedlings are established, you can water from above using a very fine rose, taking care not to dislodge seeds or damage young seedlings. Think of it as mimicking gentle rain.
- Check your trays regularly rather than following a rigid watering schedule. Daily weather and temperature will influence how often they need water.



A useful tip from Milli is simply to pick up the pot or tray. If it feels very light, it probably needs a drink.

SEED TRAYS & GROWING ON

- Milli uses different sowing methods depending on the seed and how much space she has available. Raising thousands of seeds certainly teaches you to work efficiently!
- Growing in individual cells or modules can be useful for larger seeds and makes it easier to monitor germination and see how each crop is performing. Fine seeds can also be sown into seed trays, taking care not to sow too thickly.
- Labelling is so important! Milli recommends preparing labels in batches before you start and keeping them alongside the seed packets so you can label everything as you go. A brilliant tip!
- Once seedlings are large enough to handle, some hardy annuals can be moved into 9cm pots and grown on in an unheated greenhouse. Others are better suited to modules or direct sowing.
- Poppies and nigella can be particularly sensitive to root disturbance, so direct sowing is often preferable. If transplanting, handle them with great care.
- Over winter, young plants benefit from a sheltered, bright position with good ventilation. An unheated greenhouse or cold frame is ideal for many varieties.
- A clear, lidded, plastic storage box can offer some temporary shelter, provided it allows plenty of light, has adequate drainage and is well ventilated. Remove the lid during the day when conditions allow, and make sure water cannot collect around the pots. A storage box alone won't reliably protect seedlings from hard frost, so additional protection or moving them into a more sheltered space may be necessary during particularly severe weather.

SAVING YOUR OWN SEED

Cosmos is a wonderful flower for observing the process of seed formation and ripening. As the flowers fade, you can watch the seed heads develop and begin to recognise the signs of mature seed. The appearance of cosmos seed can help distinguish well-developed seeds from empty or immature material, although appearance alone cannot guarantee that a seed will germinate.

Flower → pollination → fading flower → seed formation → seeds ripening → seed dispersal

As flowers fade, the petals fall away and seeds begin to form. Once mature, many seed heads naturally open or release their seeds. Cosmos, nigella and poppies are lovely plants to start with when learning to save seed. Some seeds are relatively easy to separate and store, while others need a little cleaning to remove the surrounding chaff.

Here are a few simple steps to follow:

- **Collecting:** Allow seeds to mature sufficiently on the plant before cutting the seed heads. Look for the signs of ripeness appropriate to each variety, such as dry, browning seed heads and well-developed seeds.
- **Drying:** If necessary, cut mature seed heads with some stem attached and hang them upside down somewhere dry and well ventilated. A large paper bag can help catch seeds as they fall, but avoid trapping moisture.
- **Threshing:** Once fully dry, gently break up the seed heads to release the seeds.
- **Winnowing:** This uses moving air to separate lighter chaff from heavier seeds. You can gently blow across a small amount of seed or carefully tip it from one container to another outdoors.
- **Sieving:** For finer seeds, a sieve can help separate the seed from unwanted plant material.
- **Storing:** Make sure the seeds are thoroughly dry before placing them in labelled paper bags for longer-term storage. Keep them somewhere cool, dry and dark until you're ready to sow.



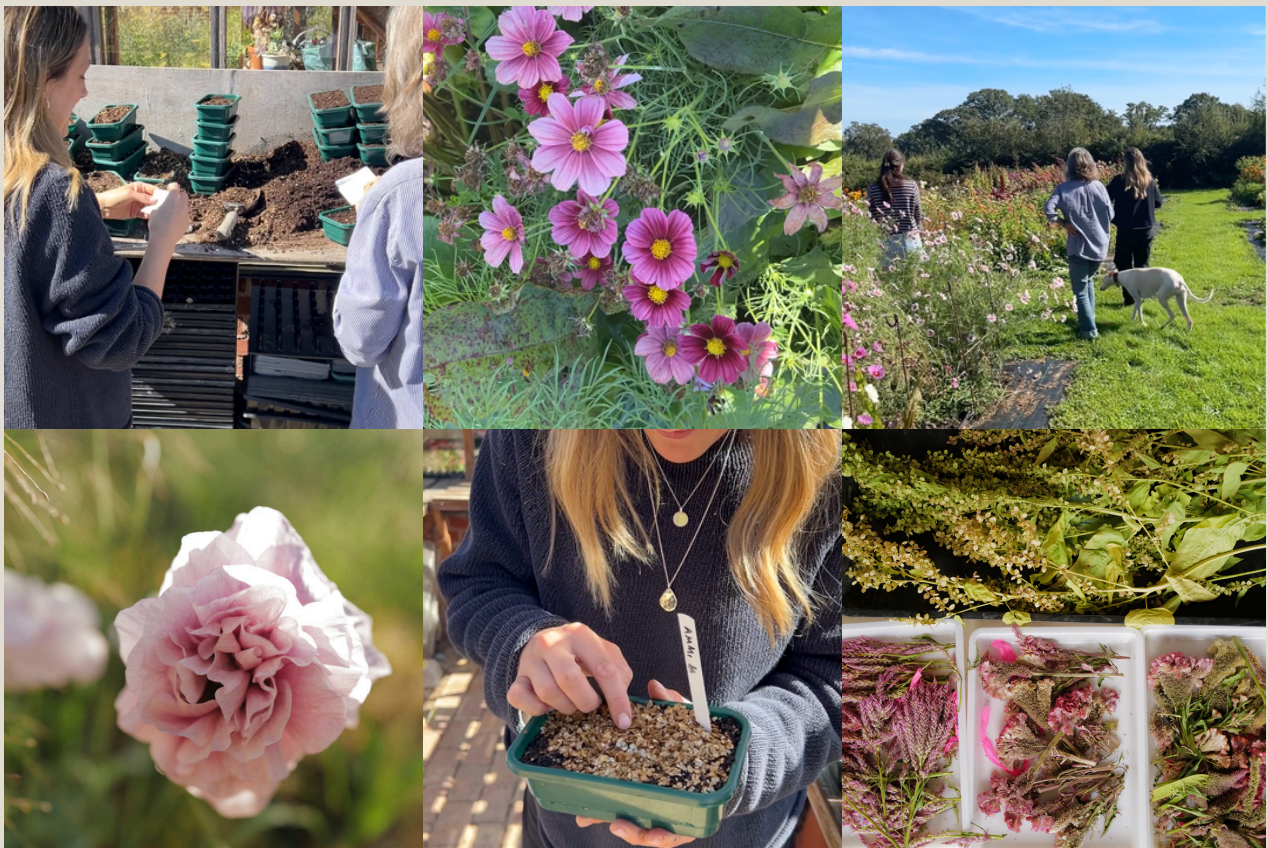
Watch what nature is doing and take your cue from it. When seeds have ripened and are beginning to disperse naturally, it's often a good sign that they're ready to collect.

TAKE YOUR CUE FROM NATURE

One of Milli's favourite things to do is walk around the garden, collect ripe seed heads and scatter the seed, then see what happens. This can work particularly well with suitable hardy annuals and biennials, allowing nature to play a part in deciding where the next generation of flowers will grow. Growing from seed isn't about getting everything perfect. There's a joy in experimentation, in observing what thrives and in accepting that you sometimes don't know quite what you're going to get. Saving seed can be a way of preserving a favourite variety, or an invitation to discover something new. Open-pollinated varieties can remain true to type when they are appropriately maintained, but crossing between different varieties, or saving seed from hybrids, can produce variation in the next generation.

Milli's cosmos, for example, may produce flowers that differ from the parent plant where cross-pollination has occurred. Rather than seeing this as a problem, she embraces the surprises as part of the pleasure of growing. An unexpected colour, a different shape or a particularly beautiful flower might become something worth watching and perhaps saving seed from again.

Celebrate the unique variations rather than always trying to make everything uniform. Sow, grow, experiment, observe, save seed and see what comes back.



STAY IN THE LOOP

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