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Growing Carnations from Seed

by Jeanne Rose, Master Gardener

Seeds are little packets of energy just waiting for you to plant them. Once they're planted, they quickly change from firm little nuggets into tender green plants. A seed contains a tiny plant embryo and just enough food to help the plant start growing. Gardeners simply plant them at the right time, water them, and then watch them grow.

One of my hobbies is growing flowering plants from seed. At various times and with varying degrees of success I have tried asters, carnations, cosmos, delphiniums, pansies, scabiosa, snapdragons, statice, stocks and, of course, the old standbys sweet peas and zinnias. My absolute favorite plants to grow from seed are carnations.

Why carnations? Lots of reasons. Carnation plants live for several years. They bloom from spring until frost the first year they are planted. They are an excellent cut flower with a long vase life and can be used for many special day decorations. There are oodles of colors to choose from, some even have contrasting stripes. But above all else, I like the heavenly spicy fragrance of carnation flowers.

Successfully growing carnation flowers from seed is easy, but it does take some time. To me it is worth it because the plants live for many years and their flower aroma is worth the effort. My favorite to grow is the Chabaud series, which are the florist-type and not the flowerbed border-type.

Almost any container is fine to use for starting seeds as long as there are holes in the bottom for fast water drainage. If you wish you can recycle half-gallon milk cartons by stapling the opening shut, laying the carton on one side, poking a few slits on one side for drainage and cutting out the opposite side. Other "recycled" containers work equally well.

January and early February are the best months to sow carnation seeds. Here's my step-by-step procedure: Use any good potting mix for your soil, but before filling the containers prepare the mix by adding some water and getting it moist. Then fill the containers to about an inch from the top.

Scatter the seeds evenly over the surface and then lightly cover them with soil mix. Water sparingly and insert the container into a clear plastic bag (a produce bag from the grocery store will do), and seal with a twist tie. The bag maintains an ideal level of humidity, which aids seed germination.

My kitchen stove is a gas range with pilot lights and has a work surface between the burners. I use the heat from the top pilot lights as a source of bottom heat for my seedlings. By doing this I have seedlings emerge in 2-3 days. If you don't have a bottom-heat source, you can still start carnations from seed indoors; germination will just take a little longer.

After a good percentage of the seedlings have emerged, I remove the container from the bag and set it out into direct sun. It is early enough in the season so sunburn should not be a problem, but don't forget to water as necessary to prevent the soil from drying. When 2-3 true leaves have developed, it's time to repot into six-packs or other small containers to allow root and shoot growth to continue.

This method works for many kinds of flowers and vegetables, especially tomatoes and peppers, but pay attention to the proper planting season. Tomato and pepper seedlings need to be kept indoors with as much light as possible until after frost danger or until they can be planted outdoors with some type of frost protection.

When the carnation plants are 4-5 inches tall, it is time to plant them outside. For perennial plants like carnations I like to plant my seedlings into a "nursery" for the first year. This area is easily accessible to me, but not really in full open view from my house windows. This is where I observe my new seedlings before transplanting them to their final destination. I allow the small plants to sprawl.

When they begin blooming in spring, I pull out weak plants with single flowers in favor of robust ones with multiple and double blossoms. During the summer and fall, I observe plant vigor, bloom color, and growth habit so I can match them to the perfect permanent location in my garden.

In winter, I cut back the plants to 2-3 inches above the ground and transplant them to their final spot in the garden. For straight cutting stems, I provide some support (like bamboo rods) once the new growth begins in the spring. Besides cutting blossoms, the only maintenance needed is deadheading, feeding, and watering.

Don't expect your garden carnation blossoms to be as large as commercially grown hothouse carnations. Remember those growers supply ideal amounts of light, water, humidity, temperature, and nutrition to their carnation crop 24 hours a day. However, do prepare to truly enjoy the robust spice fragrance of your garden-grown carnations. The aroma is so lovely you'll want to share the fragrance with your family and friends in a bouquet!

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