

Growing Sweet Cicely from Seeds

Seeds need cold treatment in order to germinate.

Sweet cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*) is an underrated plant deserving of more attention as a culinary herb and as a sugar saver. The sweet, anise-flavoured leaves and stalks are used as a sweetener in desserts, saving as much as half the sugar. Because it has no calories, sweet cicely is a good alternative in sugar-reduced diets. Sweet cicely is tolerated well by diabetics.

Sweet cicely is a perennial hardy in zones 3-7. Once established it persists for many years with little or no care. It tolerates full sun or partial shade, and while it prefers deep, rich, moist soil, it will grow in drier and less fertile soils.

Sweet cicely seeds do not remain viable for long. The sooner you start the germination process the better. We consistently get good results with fresh seeds sown in the first 6-9 months after harvest.

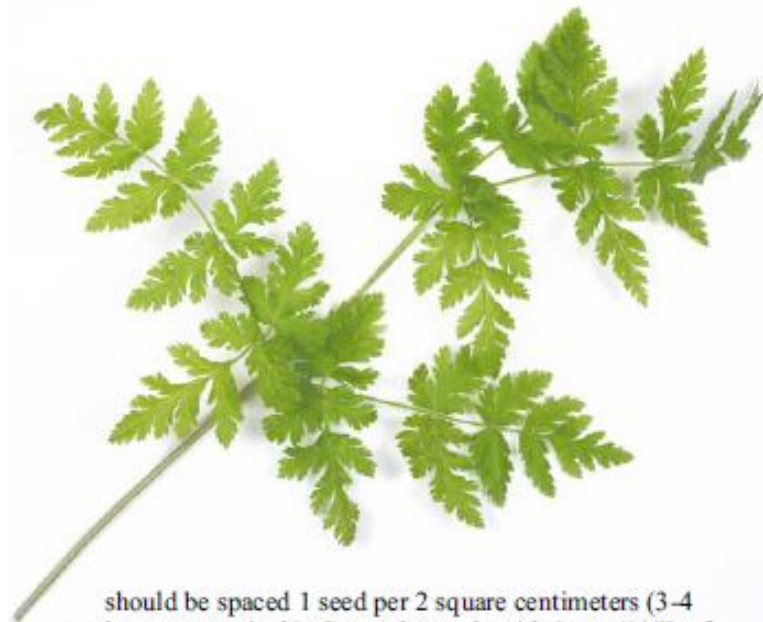
Seed Dormancy

Sweet cicely seeds are naturally dormant. Germination does not occur unless the seeds are exposed to a period of cool temperatures. A cool period followed by a warm period is the signal to sweet cicely seeds that winter has passed and it is safe to begin the process of germination.

You can emulate the effects of autumn and winter by using a fridge. Or you can plant seeds outdoors and let nature supply the cool and warm temperatures needed for germination.

Using a Fridge

To break dormancy it is not enough to store the seeds in a fridge for a while. Sweet cicely seeds must be both cold *and* wet throughout the cool treatment period. One way to do this is to mix the seeds with moist sand and store the mixture in a plastic bag in a fridge. After 8 weeks dump the seed-sand mixture on a sieve, wash out the sand, and then sow the washed seeds in a seed box filled with sterilized sowing medium. The seeds



should be spaced 1 seed per 2 square centimeters (3-4 seeds per square inch). Cover the seeds with 5 mm (1/4") of sowing medium, firm down, and water thoroughly.

A simpler method is to sow the seeds in the seed box first, water, then enclose the seed box in a plastic bag and keep in a fridge for 8 weeks.

After the cool treatment is complete (in a sand bag or in a seed box), the seed box should be moved to a warm (20-25°C/70-75°F) and sunny location. Seedlings appear in 10-21 days.

Outdoor Sowing

Sweet cicely may be sown directly in the garden outdoors in summer or autumn. Plant deeper than you would in a seed box, about 1 cm (1/2") deep, but keep the spacing of the seeds the same. Rodents love to eat the seeds, so protect seeds by laying a 5 mm (1/4") mesh wire screen over the seeded area. Cover the screen with a mulch and leave on until early spring, before germination begins.

Instead of sowing directly in the garden, seeds may be sown in a seed box which is then sunk into the ground so that the top edges are flush with the surrounding soil. A 5 mm (1/4") mesh wire screen is placed over the seed box to protect seeds from rodents, and a mulch is placed over the screen until early spring. In spring, the seed box is lifted and moved where it will receive close attention during the critical germination period.

Transplanting

When the cotyledons (first pair of leaves) appear they will resemble grass leaves. But subsequent leaves will have the lacy, deeply cut foliage typical of sweet cicely. When seedlings are 5-7 cm (2-3") high transplant them to flats or small pots. Light should be bright but not the harshly so; a place that receives filtered sunlight in midday would be ideal.

In 6-8 weeks plants should be strong enough to transplant to their permanent places in the garden.