

Growing Capers From Seed



To start Capers from seed. When you read some of the advice available on the web it can seem like a daunting task.

So, this is not the definitive guide to growing capers from seed, this is what works for me. If you don't live in a Mediterranean climate, well, this may not necessarily work for you, but perhaps the lessons I've learned can help.

Sow the caper seeds in 6 packs, 1 seed per cell for fresh off the plant seeds, 2 seeds per cell for older seeds (lessons A & C) about 1/4 inch deep. I use regular bagged potting soil, not seed starting mix, although I suppose seed Start sowing seeds anytime from September through November (lesson B). Set the sown 6-packs in a shady protected place *outside* (lesson B again). I like to put them in a black

square nursery flat (the ones with the large meshed bottoms) with another flat over the top to keep birds and other critters out. At this point you can almost forget about them until late February or March, just don't let them dry out.

In late February or early March, move the flats to a warmer spot where they will get some sun, not too much, that drying out thing again. The seeds should start to germinate in 2 to 3 weeks. I've even brought some of the packs indoors to my seed starting setup with heat mats and grow lights, which works quite well.

Do not attempt to pot up the seedlings until they have a couple or more true leaves and the roots have developed enough to hold the soil together . It can take a couple of months for the seedlings to get large enough. If there are 2 seedlings in a cell you need to *cut* one of them off at the soil line, don't pull it out (lesson C). When it's easy to pop the plants out of the cells without having the soil crumble too much you can pot the seedlings up into 4-inch pots and grow them on for the rest of the year or longer.

The next winter or spring they can be planted out or potted up into large pots. I've found that pot grown capers bloom best in pots that hold at least 15 gallons of soil. The first flowers may appear as early as year 2. Capers are drought tolerant plants but pot grown plants need regular water and fertilizing. During the hottest months I water my plants almost every day, although their need for water will vary

depending on how much sun they get. My pots get full sun almost all day so they dry out quickly. I fertilize almost weekly during the summer, less in the

fall, none after October and resume occasional fertilizing in the spring when new growth appears.



Caper plants are partly to fully deciduous, depending on weather and exposure. A hard freeze a couple of years ago knocked all my plants completely down to their crowns but they resprouted beautifully. Don't hard prune the plants until they are at least 2 years old. I've found the best time to prune is in the winter when the plants are dormant. Often times the shoots will die back a couple of inches from the pruning cut if the pruning is done later.



Here's what [Purdue University](#) advises:

Caper seeds are miniscule and are slow to nurture into transplantable seedlings. Fresh caper seeds germinate readily - but only in low percentages. Dried seeds become dormant and are notably difficult to germinate and therefore require extra measures to grow. Dried seeds should be initially immersed in warm water (40°C or 105°F) and then let soak for 1 day. Seeds should be wrapped in a moist cloth, placed in a sealed glass jar and kept in the refrigerator for 2 - 3 months. After refrigeration, soak the seeds again in warm water overnight. Plant the seeds about 1 cm deep in a loose well drained soil media. Young caper plants can be grown in a greenhouse (preferable minimum temperature of 10°C or 50°F).

And here's what the [University of California](#) advises:

Germination of caper seeds is difficult, but the following methods have resulted in 40 to 75 percent germination. First, heat some water to 110°F or 115°F, and put the seeds into the warm water to soak for at least 12 hours, during which time you can allow the water to cool to room temperature. After 12 hours, discard the water, wrap the seeds in a moist towel, place them in a plastic bag, and keep them in the refrigerator for 65 to 70 days. Then take the seeds out of

the refrigerator and soak them in warm water (110-115°F) overnight. Plant the seed about 1/4 to 1/2 inch deep in a soil mix of 50-25-25 parts of UC soil, perlite and sand, respectively (planting mix can be used instead of UC soil mix). Use 6 inch clay pots or deep flats. Water well and keep in a warm area (70-85°F), in partial to full sun. Do not allow the top of soil to crust over. Keep the soil moist. Germination should start within 3 to 4 weeks and may continue for 2 to 3 months. Not all seeds will germinate at the same time.



So, here are the lessons that I've learned from my experiments with all those seeds.

A. *Really fresh* caper seeds have about a 95% germination rate. The germination rates decline as the seeds get older (duh, true for all seeds), year old seeds still have pretty good rates of 75 to 80%.

B. The seeds, whether fresh or dry need to be chilled (cold stratification) but you don't need

to take up precious space in the refrigerator if you live in a Mediterranean climate (like I do). Capers are native to the Mediterranean and the seeds sprout and produce plants in the darnedest places there - most notably stone walls. Winter temperatures provide all the chilling that the seeds need, naturally. Just how much cold the seeds need, or can withstand, I haven't figured out. I also didn't find any difference in using seeds that were soaked in warm water first.

C. Caper seedlings really do not like to have their roots tampered with