

## **Growing Rudbeckia In The Home Garden**

Rudbeckias are easy to grow, low-maintenance flowers that are ideal for beginning gardeners, yet their wide range of sizes, colors, shapes and forms appeal to the most experienced plantsperson. They are easy to start from seed, which is readily available from retail, mail order and Internet seed sources.

Rudbeckias grow best in full sun in average well-drained soil, but will tolerate light shade and dry conditions. In areas of heat and high humidity, powdery mildew can be a problem. Minimize the occurrence and spread of the disease by planting in an area with good air circulation and maintaining adequate spacing between plants. Rudbeckia is recommended as being deer-resistant, but slugs and snails like to eat the young plants.

Starting seed indoors - Start rudbeckia seeds indoors about 6-8 weeks before the last frost date. Thoroughly moisten sterile, seed-starting mix then fill your flats, trays or pots to within  $\hat{A}$ ¼ inch of the top of the container. Put 1-2 seeds in each cell or small pot, then press seeds gently into the surface but do not bury them. Germination of perennial varieties started indoors may improve if placed in a cold area or the refrigerator for 4 weeks after planting the seeds, then moving them back into the warmer temperatures.

Place in a warm location until seeds begin to grow about 5-14 days later. A room temperature of 70°F-72°F is ideal for starting seeds. After seedlings appear, move the container to a bright, sunny window or place under plant lights. When seedlings have a couple sets of leaves, thin to the strongest plant by pinching or cutting excess seedlings at the soil line.

Before transplanting the tender seedlings into the garden they need to be hardened-off, allowing them to adjust to the outdoor conditions. Place seedlings outdoors in a shaded or protected location for short periods of time, about 4 hours per day to start. Each day, leave plants outdoors for a couple hours longer and gradually move into brighter light conditions. Check the soil often to make sure it's moist and water if necessary. After 10-14 days plant in the garden.

Direct-seeding into the garden - Black-eyed Susans are easy to start directly in the garden, generally when daytime temperatures are around 60°F. Perennial varieties can be sown in fall or early spring. Scatter seeds then gently press them into the soil or cover very lightly with soil. Water regularly so the seedbed stays moist. As seedlings grow, thin to 6-8 inches apart.

Excess fertilizer can make plants weak and cause flower stems to flop. Water when the soil is dry to maintain even moisture. To promote blooming and extend the flowering period, remove or deadhead faded flowers by pinching off the blooms at the base of the flower stem. If you want to attract birds, leave old flowers on the plant so they can go to seed. Be aware that rudbeckia often self-seeds, resulting in new seedlings sprouting up around the garden. Extra plants may need to be removed or transplanted to prevent crowding.

Source: National Garden Bureau, [www.ngb.org](http://www.ngb.org).