

## Confessions of a Lazy Gardener

### Issue #2: Seed Starting the Hard Way Building a Seed Starting Box.

*Reprinted December 2021*



As you know, warmth speeds seed germination. These days, the best way to get heat to your plants is probably one of those heat mats on which you set your seedling trays. Back in the Pleistocene Era when I was starting out, those mats seemed kind of an expensive, sissy way to go. So, I built a seed starting box with a heating cable buried in sand, and I use it extensively each spring. Based on my experience, pretty much anybody can build one of these if there's enough old plywood and scrap lumber lying around. Here's what I did:

First, I needed a strong table, since I wanted this to end up at working level. It just so happened that the previous owners of our house left a huge old workshop table in the garage, and it was definitely strong enough to hold a big box full of sand. And it is quite ugly, which fits into the general decorating scheme in our basement. (If it had been made of orange velour, it would have fit in perfectly, but we can't have everything in life.)

Next, I needed to figure out the dimensions of this box. Most people would do this by deciding how many shop lights to use and determining the optimum illumination pattern, or figure out how many 10x20 trays they'd like to start at once. I chose another path: I had an old piece of plywood that was about 3.5'x4', so that's what the dimensions of the box turned out to be. I used that for the base, then found some boards that had been used in a misguided attempt to remodel the windows in the house (they were painted lime green or turquoise, except for the ones that had been covered with plaid wallpaper). I think they are just standard 1x4 boards. I cut them to fit the length and width of the plywood. To join all the pieces together, I used little angle iron braces from the hardware store. No fancy mitered joints or anything like that. It's ugly, but it works.

Next, I lined the box with heavy plastic -- with enough on the sides to overlap the outside. For people with more solidly-built boxes, the plastic is primarily a moisture barrier -- to keep water from leaking all over when you spill. In my case, I also needed it to hold the sand in the box.

Then, I put about an inch of sand in the bottom of the box. NOTE: it is important to have the box in its final location before you start putting sand in it! Even mild-mannered husbands get a little cranky when they get roped into projects involving lifting sand-filled boxes up onto shop tables. Especially if all the sand shifts to their end, and they're standing perilously close to the cat's litter box.

Next, you need to arrange a 48" heating cable in the sand, without having it twist or cross over itself. At first glance, it seems impossible, and it nearly is, but it can be done. Turning on the cable and letting it warm up helps it to behave a little better. Or, if you were a snake charmer in a former life, you might have an advantage. When the cable is all arranged, cover everything with another inch of sand. Make sure all of the cable is buried, especially the little thermostat unit.

Hang some shop lights above this contraption, and you're basically done. I put down 10x20 trays without holes directly on the sand, then put smaller seedling containers in the trays and water from the bottom. It really does work pretty well.

The main problem I've had with this system over the years was my first cat Sara. No, she didn't see this as a second litter box (thankfully), but she did like to sleep on that nice warm sand under blinding fluorescence. I had no problem with this unless she ended up sleeping on top of a whole flat of celosia. Which happened.



*Above: the bench in all its dusty glory.*

Would I do this again? No. I'd buy a mat. But since I have it and it works just fine, I'll keep it until something major fails. Not sure what that would be, since there aren't any "major" components! And it would be a real pain to empty all that sand out!

Next time: Seed germination the lazy way.