

Five ways to increase your seed germination rates

When you start plants from seeds one of the most important things you want to achieve is a very high and fast germination rate. However if you try to do seed germination without any additional effort you will most likely reach sub-optimal results since there are some natural factors that hinder seed germination that need to be eliminated in order to achieve the best possible results. Today we are going to talk about five things you can do in order to provide the best conditions for the germination of your seeds.

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Temperature is very important. When doing seed germination one of the most critical factors is seed temperature. Some plants require cold temperatures to germinate – for example spinach's germination rate drops to about half when you go from 15 to 25°C – while other plants require higher temperature – for coriander it's basically the opposite. For your seedling emergence rate to be as high as possible ensure that you are giving them the temperature they ideally want, which depends on the plant species. Below you can see a table with germination temperatures for several plant species.

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Pretreat seeds with PEG-6000. Polyethylene glycol treatments can dramatically increase seed germination rates (see [here](#)).

We have known this since the mid 1970's and we have also known that the optimum treatment duration and air-drying effects change according to plant species. Applying a general PEG-6000 treatment, as I described [here](#) a few years ago, might or might not work depending on the plant you're trying to work with. For best results you need to search the scientific literature for the best PEG-6000 treatment or – if this information is not present – design your own experiments to figure this out.

Seed disinfection. Seeds are usually covered in microorganisms that can seriously impair seed germination rates. In order to eliminate this issue seeds need to be disinfected prior to germination with a chemical agent (most commonly either hydrogen peroxide or sodium hypochlorite solutions). For this purpose solutions in the order of 0.1-2% NaClO are generally used with different soaking times varying between different papers. You can read more about this sort of process [here](#). Treatments are usually quick with disinfection lasting only a few minutes with subsequent plain water baths to eliminate any excess oxidant.

Introduce some good guys. In the same way that there are pathogens that can hinder seed germination there are some "good guys" that can stimulate seed germination. In particular there are *trichoderma* species that have been known to increase germination rates for some plant species. For example in this paper using okra (see [here](#)) there was an important increase in germination rates when using *T. harzianum* as a beneficial fungi. You should look for some scientific literature surrounding the species that interest you or – if that's not available – apply a product that contains a few *trichoderma* species.

Using GA₃ for stimulation. The final trick in your arsenal to increase germination rates is to use Gibberellic acid to stimulate your seed germination. Optimum concentration of

gibberellic acid, treatment lengths and effects depend fundamentally on the plant species used but this is acknowledged to be a quite universal stimulant for seed germination rates in the general scientific literature. You can read [this paper](#) to see the effects of gibberellic acid on a wide variety of species found in western Australia (so that you can grasp how different its action can be). For particular species you can find articles like [this one](#) – for tomatoes – where different GA_3 concentrations are tested to figure out the best application rate. The effect can be quite dramatic as in the image below (taken from [this paper](#)).

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In the end there are many things we can do to improve seed germination and the above is by no means an exhaustive list. For particular plant species there can be other tricks – for example things like scarification – which can lead to important improvements in germination rates as well. However the above advice is quite general and can probably help you increase germination rates for a wide variety of plant species.

Making your own DIY plant rooting gel

Cloning is a very common technique used by a large variety of plant growers. When growing plants from seeds there is an important unpredictability factor in what you might get so

cloning ensures that you get a clear genetic copy of the parent and therefore removes a lot of the variability inherent to the growing process when starting from seed. To perform the cloning process most growers use the aid of rooting hormones which are usually sold in the form of a gel at high prices. Today we are going to learn how to make our own DIY plant rooting gel using ingredients that can be easily bought online for a fraction of the cost.

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Rooting gels have basically four ingredients. A rooting hormone (active ingredient), a gelling agent (usually an acrylic acid polymer), a base (needed to increase the viscosity given by the gelling agent) and a preservative (because fungi eat anything). Today we are going to talk about making a rooting gel without any preservative – which is simpler – so don't make very large quantities because it can spoil after some time (probably will last for a month or so). To make this you will need the following:

- Distilled or RO water
- Indole-3-butyric acid (you can get it [here](#)) 0.69 USD/g
- Carbopol 940 (you can get it [here](#)) 0.09 USD/g
- Potassium hydroxide (you can get it [here](#)) 0.02 USD/g
- Two containers for mixing (one around 60% of the volume you want to make, the other around 120%)
- A scale that can weight with enough precision according to the amount you want to prepare (for 1L you will need a +/- 0.1g scale).

Warning: Potassium hydroxide is a very strong base. Handle with a lot of care wearing protective eye wear and nitrile or PVC gloves. Do not agitate it before opening it since KOH powder is very caustic.

Once you get these ingredients the process is quite simple. For a one liter preparation add 500 mL of water to one container (we will call this one A) and 500mL to another container (which we will call B). Add 3.0g of the Indole-3-butyric acid to the A container along with 0.6g of potassium hydroxide and mix until both are dissolved. Heat the water in container B to 120-140F (48-60°C), stop heating and add 9.0g of Carbopol 940. Mix the water in container B thoroughly, the Carbopol 940 might take a long time to get hydrated and get into solution, stir it until there are no visible clumps (this can take around 15-60 minutes).

Once this process is done wait for B to cool to ambient temperature, then mix A and B slowly (in whichever has the largest container). When you do this the viscosity of the mixture will start to increase exponentially and you will have your rooting gel preparation. The amount of money it takes to prepare 1L is around 3 USD while the most popular rooting gel products online are charging you around 16 USD for 100mL of basically the same thing. This means that you will be saving 98% of your rooting gel costs if you make your own.

There are some other additives – including preservatives and biostimulants – that we could add to make a better product, but that's a topic for another blog post.