

# Starting Seeds in Eggshells

by Diane Mack, Master Gardener Intern

As someone who keeps a small flock of laying hens, I collect two things in abundance: chicken manure and eggshells. Friends and family cage-fight over who gets my leftover manure, but I'm left with more eggshells than I know what to do with. (Yes, I could take them to the compost pile, but that's a long walk in the dead of winter.) After reading that Martha Stewart and P. Allen Smith both advocate starting seeds in eggshells, I decided to channel my inner Martha and give it a try.

I saved up all the egg cartons I could find and filled them with our leftover shells. When I broke the eggshells, I tried to crack them so about two thirds of the larger shell end remained for the "pot," which makes it easier to fill with starter mix later. After lightly rinsing the shell, I placed them back in the egg carton and pricked two or three drainage holes in the shell bottoms with a toothpick.\* I tore off the top of the egg carton for easier handling.

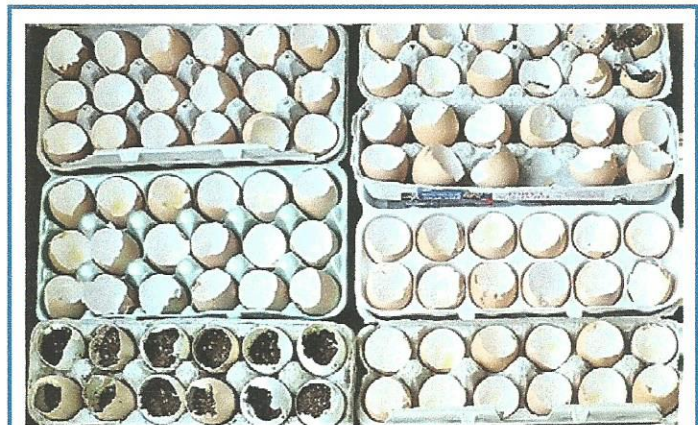
After filling all the shells with starter mix (Fig. 1), I dropped three to four seeds into each shell. Once all the shells were ready, I lightly watered with warm water and placed plastic wrap over the cartons, setting them in a sunny location.

Within 7 days, the seedlings began to emerge. (Fig. 2) I've never had great luck starting flowers from seeds so I was excited my experiment was working.

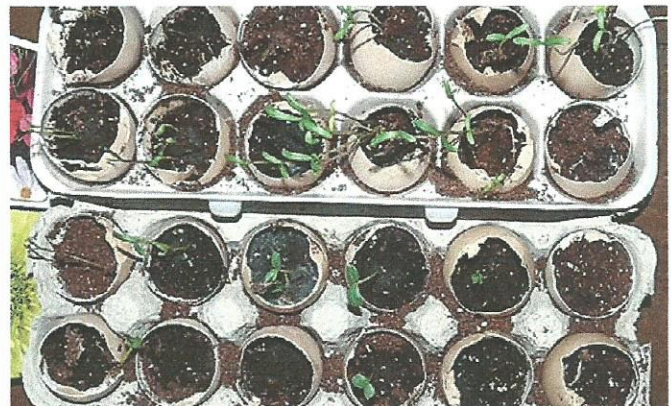
After almost three weeks, I was getting anxious, so I took my early sprouters to the garden. Before placing in the ground, I cracked open the end of the shell so the roots could easily spread. While eggshells are biodegradable, young seedlings wouldn't be able to break through their tough shell. (Fig. 3) The shell pots went into the ground well before the last freeze date and against my better judgement, but I wanted to get a head start to see how they'd do. As the seedlings with longer germination rates continue to sprout, I'll transplant them accordingly, and hopefully have a garden full of color by June. ■

\* My egg shells are pretty tough, so cracking them—and then poking the bottom with a toothpick—didn't pose any problems.

**Addendum:** 04/28/17. The weather has taken a turn for the worse and my little seedlings are under mason jars for protection. Can you believe snow is in the forecast?! I might have to start over next week.



▲ Figure 1: Shells in lower left carton are two thirds full of starter mix.



▲ Figure 2: Cosmos and zinnias are sprouting after 10 days.



▲ Figure 3: Crack open the bottom shell when planting so roots can spread.