

# THE REAL DIRT

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE LEWIS COUNTY  
MASTER GARDENER FOUNDATION



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## Spring Ahead: Get a Jump Start on Sowing Seeds

As winter teases us with early spring glimpses, it's time to kick-start preparations for the May plant sale. Though it's only February, success relies on efforts we can make right now! Starting seeds indoors ensures robust seedlings ready for transplant when it warms up. Choose quality seeds, use clean, sterile containers with a fine seed-starting mix, maintain moisture, and provide ample heat & light for healthy growth. Don't forget to label your seedlings so you know what they are when it's time to up pot!

Planning ahead and starting seeds this month will ensure a diverse, thriving selection for the sale. Don't miss the article on DIY Heat Mats for Starting Seeds for tips on keeping your seedlings cozy. You may even consider attending the Propagating with Seeds class at Chehalis Outfitters on February 15th from 10-11am. And check out Cat's article on soil blocking as well! Happy sowing! 🌱

# Through a Garden Gate

## Granada's Alhambra

EL EVERETT-BECHTOLD



Our Autumn family holiday in 2024 took us to Spain and what a fabulous trip it was with so many things to see and taste – a sensory overload. However, for me, the highlight was Granada and the Alhambra. Its gardens and courtyards form an all-encompassing sensory experience where indoor and outdoor areas blend and the earthly becomes heavenly.

The Alhambra has a very long and convoluted history with a surprising amount of information about it being conjecture and often inaccurate. Much of what we see today is largely a restoration but even when built its original design was itself an evocation of a lost garden paradise. The Alhambra is considered to be the third and final great Islamic site of medieval

Spain after Cordoba's Mezquita and Seville's Alcazar. The complex was originally built by the Nasrid dynasty with, at its largest, 40,000 residents sprawled across the Sabika Hill.

The fort (above) encompasses the oldest structures on the site with the Nasrid-era structures as well as the Charles V palace and museum. Across the ravine is the Generalife Gardens (not, as some might think, an insurance company) which served as the king's personal retreat. The forest tracts (shown above) hosted hunts and other outdoor activities. View from the Generalife gardens back to the main fort area (below).



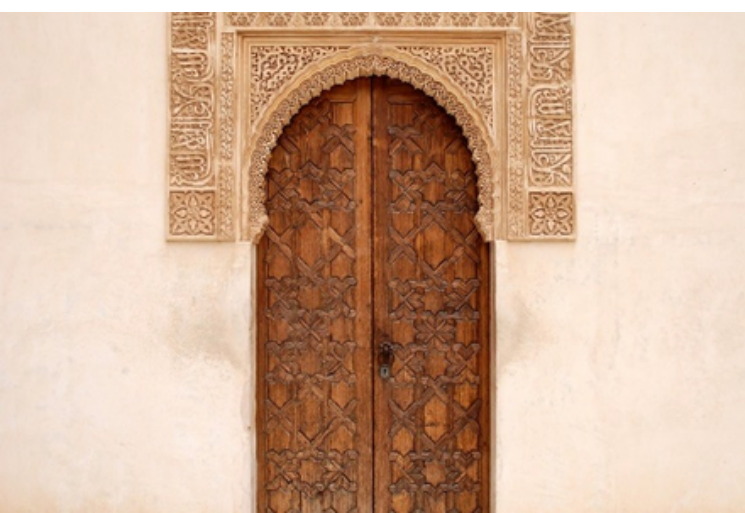




The jewels of the Alhambra, from an architectural perspective, are the Nasrid Palaces. As the last Muslim dynasty in Spain their position was precarious: external Christian threats and internal power struggles led to a tumultuous time. The complex grew without an overall plan eventually featuring approximately six individual palaces well suited to housing many competing factions. Even though the fort sits high above the modern town of Granada it is not the views that are the most

beautiful feature but the private, inward-looking courtyards with their narrow reflecting pools, fountains and spectacular stucco work.

While Northern Europe was in the depths of a Dark Age, Moorish mathematicians ingeniously calculated extraordinary designs - their sophistication is matched only by their beauty.





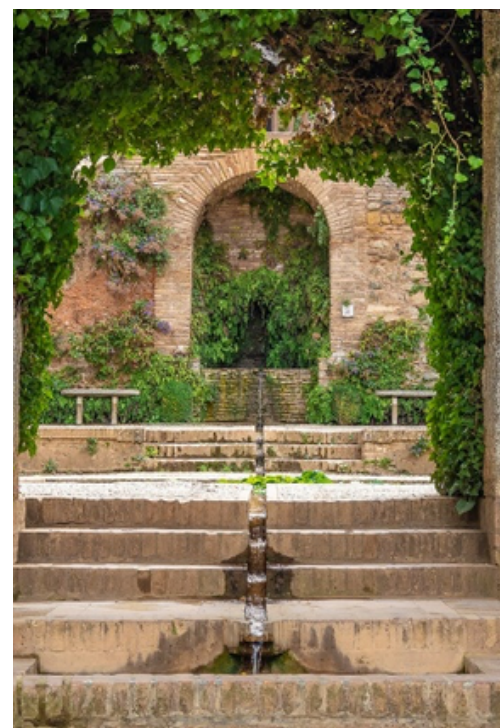


The Qur'an calls water the basis of creation and it plays a central role in Islamic gardens. Although the Romans are given the credit for all the aqueducts in Spain the Moors perfected the handling of water with a great aesthetic sense of beauty.

All around the Nasrid Palaces are courtyards of water – as in the Qur'an paradise brims with water – so do these gardens.



Once outside the immediate Nasrid Palaces area it is tricky to know how much of the gardens retain their Moorish design as they have been substantially redesigned over the years. It does seem if the classic elements of Islamic gardens have been retained: water, shady pavilions, and geometric layouts.







Shady pavilllions



Abundant topiary and hedging throughout the gardens giving an immaculate structure



Moving waterways

Note the water flowing down on the top of the wall of the staircase.



Wonderful walkways

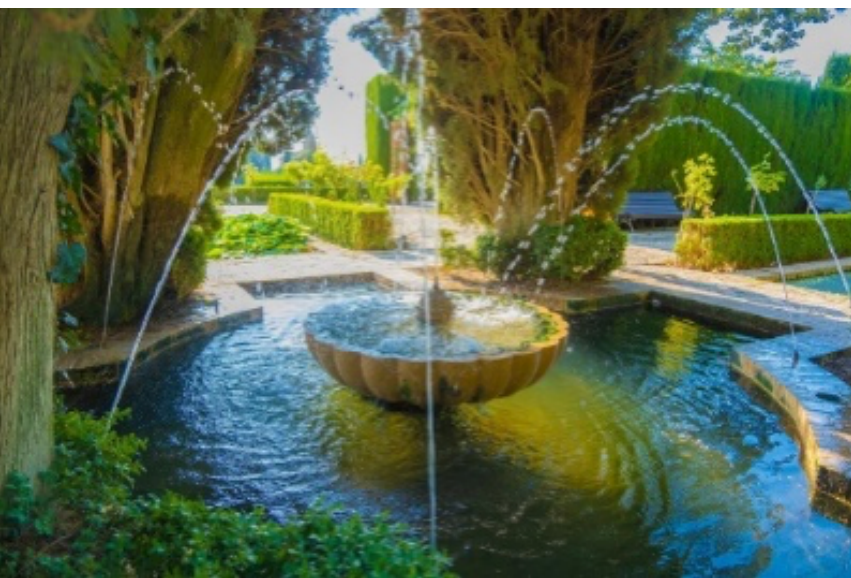






The last garden area we visited – at the end of a long day – was that of The Palacio de Generlife (Architect's Garden) that was built in the early 1300's as a summer palace and country estate of the Moorish kings. Like the gardens inside the Alhambra's walls, these were extensively redesigned in the first half of the 20th century. These gardens were originally used to grow food for residents as well as strolling and relaxation. The buildings were designed in a simpler style – it calls to mind Maria Antoinette's "rustic retreat" at Versailles; even royalty needed a break.

While the buildings may lack "sophistication" the gardens are outstanding; cooling fountains, plentiful shade and immaculate structure were all hallmarks of the spaces as we progressed from one room to the next. Despite the crowds the gardens still managed to impart a feeling of wonder, peace and calm.





From the sublime beauty of the Nasrid Palaces (left) to the whimsical fancy of the Generalife (middle) to the wonders of nature (right), the Alhambra is spectacular. Breathtaking. Magical.



## Cat's Chipotle Chili

### INGREDIENTS

15 oz. pinto beans  
15 oz. mixed beans  
1 medium onion  
1 bell pepper  
½ c. carrots or celery  
4 cloves garlic  
15 oz. diced tomatoes  
15 oz. tomato sauce  
3 oz. tomato paste  
2 tsp. chili powder  
2 tsp. cumin  
1 tsp. paprika  
½ tsp. salt  
Black pepper  
5 chipotle peppers in adobo, chopped  
1 c. vegetable broth

### STEPS

Dice vegetables and mince garlic.  
Add all ingredients to pressure cooker and cook on high for 10 minutes w/ natural release.

### NOTE

To use dried beans instead of canned, soak 128g of each bean in water overnight. Drain and add beans + 2 c. additional vegetable broth and the remaining ingredients to pressure cooker and cook for 20 minutes instead of 10.



**Capsaicin in chipotle peppers can help reduce inflammation and decrease chances of heart disease.**



# Thyme to Discover Heirlooms

## The History of White Sage

JEANNETTE LAWSON



White Sage (*Salvia apiana*), commonly called Smudging Sage by Native Americans, has a rich history.

This fragrant herb, native to the southwestern United States, is not only valued for its traditional and cultural significance but also adds a unique beauty to your garden with its silvery-green leaves and delicate white flowers. It attracts beneficial insects, providing a valuable food source for native wildlife. It thrives in dry, sandy, well draining soil and lots of hot sunny days.

White Sage is deeply rooted in the cultures and lifeways of Indigenous communities of Southern California and northern Baja, the only region this sage naturally occurs in the world.

This plant is considered the sacred sage and is an evergreen perennial shrub that can be found harvested on the border of the southwestern United



States and northwestern Mexico. It is historically used by Native Americans to make a traditional food called pinole, one of their staple foods.

Pinole was first used by the Aztecs in Mexico and Central America and is an ancient, cultural, nutrient rich food. It was believed to help with superior endurance, energy and health.

A coarse ground powder, consisting of roasted purple maize, cacao beans, and spices (white sage), was believed to help the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico's Copper Canyons to run hundreds of miles every few days. Pinole's protein, fiber, whole grains, and high anti-oxidant levels was a staple for these Indians.

White sage has been used by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years.



The practice of 'smudging' or smoke cleansing has many different purposes and meanings. Smudging was used to purify a home, mind and body of negative energy. It was also used for sacred ceremonies and prayers.

Other traditional uses of white sage were medicinal, such as tea, as an eyewash, and as a decongestant and treatment for colds and coughs. Like seeds of most sages, the tiny white sage seeds were eaten. White sage leaves were carried in the mouth or under the arms to disguise the human scent when hunting. Some tribes laid young women on a bed of sage leaves in a coming-of-age ceremony.

Unfortunately, this plant is being negatively affected by many factors. To name a few, overharvesting (legally and illegally), climate change, drought, wildfire, and aroma therapy oils Urban growth has also had a significant effect on the survival of white sage in its natural habitat.

The use of white sage has become popular with people not only across the U.S. but in other countries as well. This, plus the overharvesting and incorrect harvesting of this native plant is threatening its ability to survive. This has become such a problem that some states have taken action to protect white sage.

In California there are laws in place, as of 2023, that strictly prohibit uprooting, removing, harvesting, or cutting white sage from land owned by the state or a local government or from property not one's own without written permission from the landowner. It is unlawful to sell, offer for sale, possess with intent to sell, transport for sale, export for sale, or purchase white sage uprooted, removed, harvested, or cut. These strict laws are intended to give the white sage a fighting chance to recuperate on their native soils and to continue to be respectfully used for thousands of years to come.

Jeannette Lawson and Bob Taylor attended the Toledo Elementary School Greenhouse dedication where the Cowlitz Tribe performed a smudging ceremony. This spiritual cleansing for the new greenhouse was an extremely moving and spiritual celebration. Knowing that we were witnessing a tradition that goes back millennia was humbling.

**"A fire went through our family's sage gathering ground, and maybe five acres of white sage just burned to the ground. I was upset, but my uncle said, 'It's good—the world just needed saging off.'"**  
— Tima Lotah Link, Shmuwich Chumash



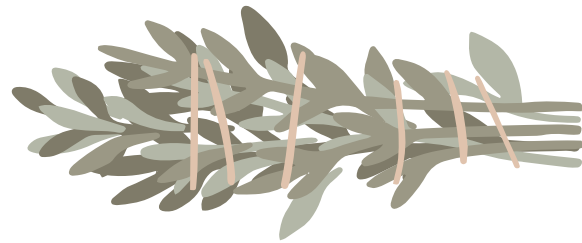


The dedication blessing of the Toldedo Greenhouse August, 26th 2023. Cowlitz Indian Tribe Elder and Spiritual Leader Tanna Engdahl performs a white sage smudging ceremony.

If you have 20 minutes of time I encourage and invite you to watch this interesting and thought-provoking short film about white sage and the first nations peoples.



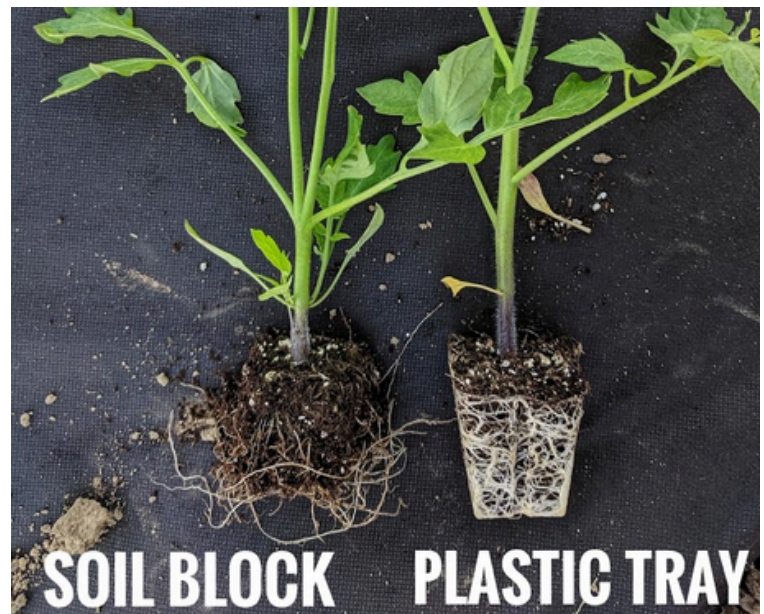
<https://www.cnps.org/conservation/white-sage>



## A Case for Soil Blocking

CAT VARNER

Soil blocking is a seed starting technique that involves creating small blocks of soil in which seeds are sown directly instead of using plastic seed trays. I have known about it for a few years but never got around to trying it, so I'm using the Real Dirt and this article as an excuse to finally research and try it this year. If you're like me and need a case study to inspire you to experiment, let this article be your spirit guide!







### Advantages versus seed trays:

- Root health: Promotes air-pruning, preventing root binding.
- Reduced transplant shock: Less root disturbance.
- Space efficiency: Blocks can be arranged closely.
- Less plastic waste: More eco-friendly, using ceramic or wood trays.

### Some cons to consider

- Initial setup: Requires investing in a soil blocker.
- Moisture management: Dries out faster.
- Skill level: Needs practice.

Now that you're curious, let's see how easy the process is!

### Materials Needed:

- Soil blocker (a tool to create soil blocks)
- Seed starting mix (a light, well-draining medium)
  - Bob's recipe is 4 parts compost, 2 parts moss, 1 vermiculite, 1 perlite
- Water
- Seeds
- (Optional) Painter scraper or spatula to press soil into the blockers and scrape excess off the bottom.

### The Process:

- *Preparation:* Mix the seed starting medium with water until it reaches a cake batter consistency.
- *Creating Blocks:* Press the mix into the soil blocker and transfer the blocks onto a flat surface using the handle.
- *Sowing Seeds:* Place 1-2 seeds in each block's indent and lightly cover with soil.
- *Watering:* Gently water the blocks or bottom water to avoid displacing seeds.
- *Care:* Treat the blocks like seed trays: use heating mats, grow lights, and cover seeds with a dome to maintain humidity during germination.

Here is an [excellent YouTube video](#) explaining how to do it!



### FAQs:

- *Up-potting:* Use a larger soil blocker for transplanting.
- *Finding soil blockers:* Available online (including non-Amazon options).
- *Trays:* Use wood, ceramic, or fiberglass trays. Thrift stores can have great finds!



# DIY Seed Starting Heat Mats

SHARON TIPPING

Creating your own heat mats for seed starting is an easy and cost-effective way to ensure your seedlings get the warmth they need.

## Materials Needed:

Incandescent rope light (18 feet)

Plywood or another rigid base

One-hole straps or pipe straps

Heat mat thermostat

Semi-rigid plastic or thin wood cover

Styrofoam insulation (optional)



## Instructions:

- 1. Attach the Rope Light:** Strap the **incandescent** rope light to the plywood or another rigid base using one-hole straps or pipe straps. An 18-foot rope light covers about 20" x 7-8 feet (approximately 13 square feet). You can adjust the spread for desired heat levels.
- 2. Link Multiple Rope Lights:** If needed, link multiple rope lights together.
- 3. Connect to Thermostat:** Plug the rope light into the heat mat thermostat, set the desired temperature, and place the probe into one of the seed cells in the potting medium. Ensure the total amperage of the rope lights does not exceed the thermostat's capacity.
- 4. Protect the Rope Light:** Cover the rope lights with semi-rigid plastic or thin wood to protect them. Placing the setup on top of Styrofoam insulation can increase efficiency.

**Cost:** An 18-foot rope light and a heating mat thermostat each cost about \$20 on Amazon. This setup has been effective for the past three years, though results may vary.





# 2025 Upcoming Events

LEWIS COUNTY MASTER GARDENER EVENTS  
FEB - JUNE

| Date & Time                   | Class                              | City      | Location                            |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>February 15</b><br>10AM    | Propagating with Seeds             | Chehalis  | Chehalis Outfitters                 |
| <b>March 8</b><br>10AM        | Planting & Growing Grapes          | Centralia | Borst Demo Garden                   |
| <b>March 15</b><br>10AM       | Blueberry Care                     | Chehalis  | Providence Place Demo Garden        |
| <b>April 5</b><br>10AM        | Up-potting Plants                  | Centralia | Borst Greenhouse Shed               |
| <b>April 12</b><br>9AM - 3PM  | Gardening for Everyone             | Centralia | Centralia College - Washington Hall |
| <b>May 17-18</b><br>9AM - 4PM | Annual Spring Plant Sale           | Chehalis  | SWW Fairgrounds - Blue Pavillion    |
| <b>June 7</b><br>10AM         | Year Round Vegetable Gardening     | Salkum    | Salkum Timberland Library           |
| <b>June 14</b><br>10AM        | Designing a Garden for All Seasons | Centralia | Borst Demo Garden                   |
| <b>June 21</b><br>10AM        | Concrete Leaf Making               | Salkum    | Salkum Timberland Library           |
| <b>June 28</b><br>10AM        | PNW Butterflies                    | Chehalis  | Providence Place Demo Garden        |

Check out the [Lewis County Master Gardener website](#) for more information about our events!

