

Planting Seeds!

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If it's November, it must be time for the return of Kid's Corner. This is the column just for kids (and their parents and teachers) who want to keep summer alive by doing garden crafts and experiments during the fall and winter. This month we're going to look at how fertilizers affect plant growth by repeating an old project with a little twist. You can conduct your own scientific experiment by growing sprouts for research instead of lunch!

Here are the supplies you'll need:

- **Two clean glass jars**
- **Cheesecloth**
- **Two rubberbands**
- **Four tablespoons of seeds (grass, alfalfa, bean)**
- **Water**
- **Houseplant fertilizer**

The first step is to mix up a quart of fertilizer water, using the directions on the package. Be sure you label this container and store it away from food. Next, divide your seeds so half are in one jar and half in the other. Use a marker, or piece of tape to label one jar "Fertilized". Cover the tops of both jars with a couple layers of cheesecloth and use the rubber bands to hold it in place.

Now your seeds need to soak. In the jar labeled "Fertilizer", slowly pour in (through the cheesecloth) enough of your fertilizer solution to cover the seeds. To the other jar, add enough plain tap water to cover the seeds. Set the jars aside and leave them overnight.

In the morning, you'll need to strain the seeds. Hold each jar over the sink and pour out the water through the cheesecloth. Shake it a few times to be sure you get all the water out. Set the jars aside again, until evening.

Is it evening? Then it's time to rinse the seeds. Pour some of your fertilizer water into the "Fertilized" jar and plain water into the other jar. Swirl the seeds around gently and pour all the water out again. Repeat this rinsing step every morning and evening and watch for the seeds to sprout!

After a week, all the seeds should have sprouted, and you should start seeing differences between the sprouts in the two jars. The sprouts in the "Fertilized" jar should be growing faster and larger. Go ahead and take them out to measure, but don't eat them. The fertilized sprouts are bigger because the fertilizer you put in the water contains nitrogen, phosphorus and other nutrients that plants need to grow. The same thing happens when we spread fertilizer on the lawn.

Sometimes, when adults spread lawn fertilizers, they spill some on the driveway or in the street. If they don't sweep the spills up, the fertilizer gets washed away into the storm sewers and ends up in our beautiful lakes. The plants that live in lakes don't need to get extra fertilizer; in fact they grow too much if they do. Have you ever been swimming or boating on a lake that was covered by algae or duckweed? Or have your legs ever gotten tangled up in weeds? Yuck! That's what happens when lake plants get extra fertilizer left by people who don't clean up their spills. What can we do about it? Help clean up! If someone at your house is spreading lawn fertilizer, grab a broom and sweep the spills back onto the lawn. Grass and leaves become fertilizer when they decompose, so if there are any grass clippings or fallen leaves in the gutter, sweep them up, too. That's a big help!