THE USE OF VERMICULITE AS A SEED COVERING

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Growing a crop from seed relies on the basic principles of providing the right conditions for the seed to germinate and grow on.

At The Nurseries we have found that using vermiculite as a covering has helped us to provide the right conditions for growing alpines from seed, but the technique would be equally suitable for nursery stock.

We sow our seeds in seed trays using a compost of 50:50 peat and sand. Once sown, the seeds are covered with a thin layer of vermiculite and placed on a heated bed to germinate.

The advantages of using vermiculite are:

Prevents capping. This allows air and water to reach the seed. It also makes it easier to remove the seedlings at pricking out.

Retains moisture. It is critical that the seed does not dry out; the vermiculite provides a film of water to protect it.

Permeable to light. Where needed, enough light reaches the seed to prevent germination being inhibited.

Reflects heat. Useful where high temperatures inhibit germination.

However, there are disadvantages, too. Vermiculite is so good at holding moisture that this can cause problems. If you have slow-growing seed the vermiculite gets caked in liverworts which makes germination difficult. So for slower germinating seed that takes months rather than weeks to come up we stick to the traditional covering of fine grit.