



Lisa Ziegler has used the soil-blocking technique to grow more than 75,000 seedlings for a cut-flower business at her home in Newport News. PHOTOS BY SANGJIB MIN/DAILY PRESS

Cultivating knowledge



1 A soil-blocking form is filled with very wet potting soil. It is then gently squeezed to release a line of small squares of soil onto a plastic serving tray.



2 Each block of soil features an indentation where a seed is placed to germinate. Here, a tomato seedling begins its life; it will be transplanted outdoors once warm weather stabilizes.



3 Within a couple of weeks, you see lots of healthy white roots on a seedling that was started with the soil-blocking method. Roots grow out into the soil instead of winding their way around the sides of a plastic tray or pot.

Check out the upcoming workshop to learn how to grow flowers well

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If you've ever held celosia seeds in the palm of your hand, you know just how teeny tiny they really are. You can comfortably hold several hundred of them at a time.

Sowing celosia seeds in a large, open germination tray can be next to impossible. It's tedious to separate them so they can sprout and begin life as healthy transplants for the outdoor garden.

Cut-flower grower Lisa Ziegler knows the trick to dealing with them and other kinds of seeds for better homegrown blooms. (Yes, in case you were wondering, Lisa is the wife of Steve Ziegler, who is featured in today's Home story on G8.)

She uses a technique called "soil blocking" to create different-sized individual squares of potting soil.

"This is the way many English gardeners grow their plants," says Ziegler. In the early 1990s, she began growing all sorts of cut flowers for florists and retail sales at her home in the Denbigh area of Newport News.

"I had horrible success with other seed-starting methods.

"I've started 75,000 seedlings this way and never had any damping-off problems." (Damping-off is a common fungal disease that attacks seedlings, weakening the stems at the soil level.)

Ziegler and organic vegetable gardener Amy Hicks of Amy's Garden in New Kent County will demonstrate the soil-blocking method and share other gardening secrets and products during a workshop 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. April 9 at the Yoder Barn Theatre in Newport News. Cost is \$55; register at 249-4187 or www.yoderbarn.com

Ziegler's first introduction to blocking up soil came from Eliot Coleman and his book "The New Organic Grower."

"He's the most practical man,"

she says. "Any serious gardener needs to have his book."

To create soil blocks, you first need very wet potting soil. Ziegler uses a black plastic tray that's 6 to 8 inches deep and a wooden-handled potato masher to get the consistency she wants.

"This is the best tool to use," she says, pushing the old-fashioned mashing utensil through the water-heavy soil.

"It's like mixing concrete."

She then uses ¾-inch or 2-inch blockers to form soil blocks. The blockers are wooden or plastic forms that you insert and wiggle around in the tray of wet soil.

When you feel like your blocker is filled with soil, you give it a gentle squeeze to release and push the blocks of soil onto something flat like a large plastic serving tray.

You can even use plastic foam meat trays to hold the soil blocks. Seeds are then dropped into the small indentations automatically formed during the blocking process.

"The better the quality of your block of soil, the better it holds up over weeks of watering before you take it out to the garden to plant," she says.

Once the blocks of soil are outfitted with seeds, Ziegler uses bottom heat mats and artificial or natural light to get her seeds to germinate. She's done this process in the basement with overhead fluorescent lights, so she knows you need no fancy greenhouse conditions to be successful.

"Look at these roots, these are fabulous," she says, showing a multitude of healthy white roots filling the block of soil on 2-week-old zinnias called Benary's Giants. Typically, these zinnias have a 75- to 90-day maturity from seed to bloom.

Starting the seeds with soil blocks gets Ziegler faster results.

"With this method, I can harvest zinnias 40 days after setting them in the garden and that's some good growing." ■