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Opening extract from

Grow Your Own Monsters

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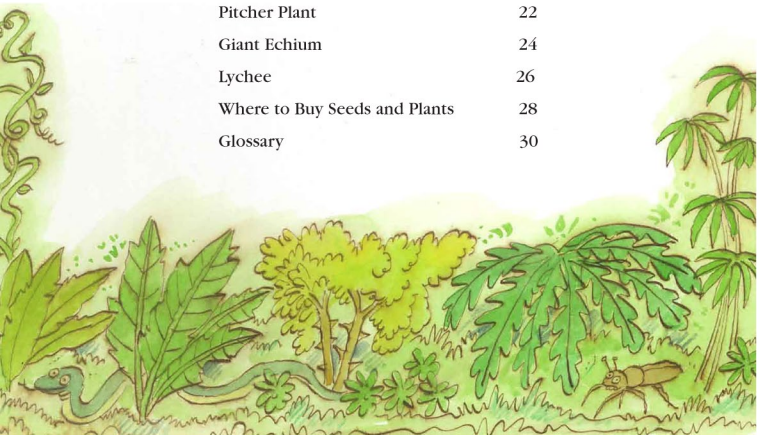
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How to Grow Monsters

The plants in this book aren't pretty flowers, they are big and weird, and that's why we've called them monsters! Here are some tips to help you grow them.

We can tell you what equipment you need and we'll help you to learn some simple gardening skills for successful monster care.

The first thing you need to know is that plants want to grow. All you have to do is give them the conditions they like, and they'll do the rest.

You don't need any fancy equipment for this. Some of the things your plants will need come pretty cheap, such as light, air and water. Most of your monster growing kit can be improvised from things you can find around your home. There is very little you'll have to buy.

Monster Habitats... Good Spots For Plants

Many of the plants in this book can be grown on a windowsill indoors or need just a corner of a garden, patio or balcony. Choose a spot that gets as much daylight as possible and is safe and easy for you to get to. Don't despair if you don't have the perfect place – you can make it perfect!

Too dark? Put tinfoil or mirrors up to reflect light on to your plant.

Too windy? A mesh windbreak will slow the breeze and protect the plant – old tights stretched over a coat-hanger frame will do fine.

Monster Cages... in other words, Pots

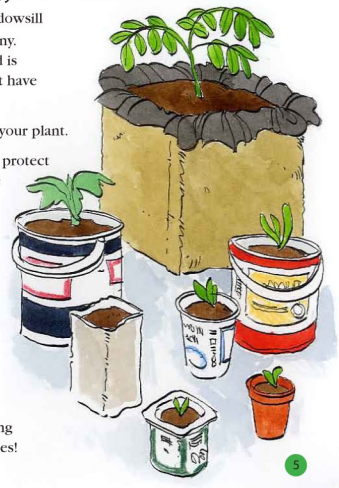
Almost anything can be a pot. Just make sure you give it a good scrub, and make holes in the bottom for water to drain away.

SMALL POTS – individual yoghurt cartons, the bottom of tetrapax

MEDIUM POTS – big yoghurt pots

BIG POTS – old paint pots (Use a hammer and nail to make holes in the bottom)

HUGE POTS – a couple of sturdy bin liners inside a strong cardboard box – but don't forget about the drainage holes!



Monster Foot Covering... Compost and Soil



Most of the plants in this book need to be planted in compost. This is one thing you'll need to buy. Buy as big a bag as you have space and money for – it works out cheaper in the long run. Get general purpose compost. Go for the 'peat-free' sort – you don't want to make plants from peat bogs homeless! Some plants (like the Pitcher plants on page 22) need soil-free compost.

Watering Monsters



All plants need water, even though some may need it just once a year! Follow the watering instructions for each monster carefully... too much water is as bad as too little. Mostly when you water plants, seeds or seedlings, aim for moist not wet – so the compost should look like freshly crumbled cake not soggy pancake mix! You won't need a posh watering can – a plastic bottle with holes punched in the lid will work perfectly.

Feeding Monsters



You can buy plant food – a liquid or a powder – at garden shops or supermarkets. All you have to do is mix it with water (the instructions on the packet will tell you how) and use it to water your plants. They'll take the food in through their roots. The instructions for each monster will tell you how often they need feeding in this way.

Getting Started

In this section we'll explain some of the words we use in the instructions for each kind of monster. We'll show you some of the basic skills you'll need for growing fine, strong monsters.



Seeds... Baby Monsters

Many of the plants in this book are grown from seeds. They come in lots of different shapes and sizes but they all need to be kept cool, dry and dark until you are ready to grow your monster.

Sowing (that's the proper word for planting a seed)



1. Sow seeds in pots and cover them with compost that is twice as deep as the seed is long.
   * For tiny seeds (like the Giant Echiums on page 24) this means sprinkling the seeds on the surface and putting a little bit of compost on top.
   * For big seeds (like the lychee on page 26) this means planting the seed 4 or 5 cm (1½-2 inches) deep in a medium-sized pot.
2. Water your seeds and put them somewhere warm – on a windowsill or in a home-made light box (see page 9). Don't let them get dry or cold, and in time the seeds will germinate (that's the proper word for when a seed begins to sprout) and begin to grow into baby plants – or seedlings.

Pricking Out

As seedlings grow, their pot may get a bit crowded – then it's time to prick them out. This means taking the strongest seedlings and giving them their own space to grow in.



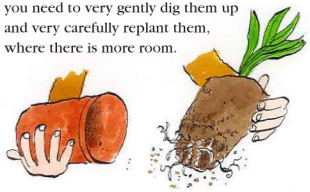
1. Gently loosen the compost round your seedlings so their roots are free.
2. Look for the biggest, strongest seedlings. Very, very gently pick each one up by its leaves.
3. Make a little hole in the compost of a new pot with your finger.
4. Put the seedling's roots in the hole, and gently press the compost around them. Don't plant it too deep, or too shallow. Just the same depth as it was growing before is best.
5. Water your pricked-out seedlings, and keep them out of bright light for a day or so. They'll probably go limp and look a bit ill, but don't worry, they will perk up.



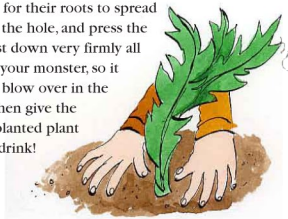


Planting out and transplanting

This is just like pricking out, only bigger! When plants outgrow their pots or are ready to be planted out in a garden you need to very gently dig them up and very carefully replant them, where there is more room.



Make sure the new hole you dig for them is not too deep or too shallow, but wide enough for their roots to spread out. Fill the hole, and press the compost down very firmly all around your monster, so it doesn't blow over in the wind. Then give the newly planted plant a good drink!



Other sorts of baby monster

Some monsters (like the Voodoo Lily on page 12) are grown from bulbs or corms. These are a lot bigger than seeds, and need different signals to make them grow... some need to be wet, some need to be dry. Read the instructions for each monster carefully to tell you what to do.



More Monsters... saving seeds

Plants are generous and make more of themselves for free. The *More Monsters* section for each plant will tell you how to make the most of this to get more plants to grow next year, or give away to friends. One really good way of collecting seeds is by putting a little bag made of old tights over the flowers when they have started to die. When the seeds are dry, store them in old envelopes somewhere cool, dry and dark.



Making Monsters Feel at Home

The monsters in this book come from different habitats all over the world, but the growing instructions for each plant will tell you what you need to do to make them feel at home where you live. Most of the plants in this book can be grown, with help, in most places, but if there's a plant that really won't grow where you live, then the instructions will tell you.

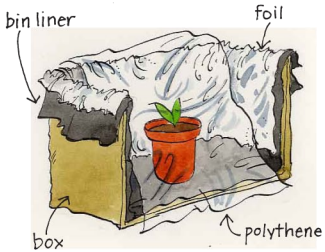
Read the growing instructions carefully and they'll help you to create just the right conditions for your monsters to thrive.

The Monster Light Box

This easy-to-make light box will help you to give seeds and seedlings the light and warmth they need, even if it's a bit chilly where you live.

Find or make a cardboard box to fit the spot where you want to put it – a nice light windowsill for instance. Cut the sides towards the light low, and keep the sides away from the light higher.

Line it with something waterproof – a dustbin liner is great. Line it again with tinfoil. The foil will reflect light and warmth and make a hot mini climate inside the box. You can make a polythene lid to keep the warmth in at night.



Mini Greenhouses

When your monsters get bigger, you could plant them in a larger pot, or put them outside on a balcony, or in the garden. If you live somewhere cool, but your monsters like heat, here's how you can keep them cosy...

Bottle greenhouse

Cut the bottom off plastic bottles or cartons to make individual greenhouses (but don't forget to water the plants inside!)



Pyramid greenhouse

Use sticks to make a pyramid frame, then stick polythene or bubble wrap when you need extra cosiness, over the top. You can make this quite big. It's a the perfect portable greenhouse for monsters that need warmth or a bit of protection on cold nights.

