

GROWING NEEM SEEDLINGS

A native of India, neem is an extraordinarily hardy tree that thrives in ecosystems ranging from the Sahara Desert to the wet salty environment of the Florida Keys. The only pests known to harm it are directly related to overwatering: slugs (which are mollusks not insects) and several strains of root rot.

In Florida and other tropical climates, neem quickly becomes a valuable shade tree, growing up to eight feet per year under optimum conditions. In colder climates, neem trees can easily be grown in large pots as highly decorative houseplants, repelling pests such as scale and spider mites that can kill common indoor plants like ficus or palm trees.

The single most important thing you can do to ensure the success of these seedlings is to **PLANT THEM NOW!** Like many tropical trees that thrive in regions where winter is not an issue – but voracious insects are – neem seeds are in a race against time the minute they ripen. They're notoriously difficult to germinate, so we sell sprouts instead of seeds, but they must be transplanted as soon as possible.

If the seedlings arrive with entwined roots, soak the root ball in water. That will allow the dirt to fall off and make it easier to separate the individual plants.

If you don't have a compost pile or favorite potting soil, ask your local nursery to recommend their best soil for houseplants. Please don't use soil from your yard unless you're an expert gardener and know exactly what you're doing. Fill a pot or flat with soil and water well. Poke a hole in the soil with your finger or another tool, and place the seedling in the hole root down.

Water well, but don't water again until the soil is dry at least an inch deep. The easiest way to kill a neem seedling – or tree – is to overwater. If a neem tree wilts while the soil is damp, it's already has too much water. Try to put it in a spot where it gets morning but not afternoon sun, and let the soil completely dry before watering again.

For optimum growth, start your seeds in small pots, but transplant into larger pots as they grow, since they're like goldfish and will only grow as large as their pots allow. We use a balanced organic fertilizer (see www.agreauxorganics.com) during their growing season and occasionally supplement with dilute fish emulsion or kelp spray. They're happiest in as much sun as you can give them, but they prefer shelter from high winds and heavy rain until they have had time to develop a good root system.

You'll also need to bring your seedlings inside before temperatures drop below about 35 degrees. Put them in your sunniest window and provide supplemental light in the evening. Like many tropical plants, neem are day-length sensitive and will stop growing in short winter days. It doesn't take much to fool them into thinking it's still summer though -- a near-by living room lamp is fine.

Stay Healthy and Happy,

Vicki Parsons