

How to make seeds thrive

Quick, which would you rather have—an ounce of gold or an ounce of begonia seed? Gold at its current market price an ounce is mere pocket change compared to a series of tuberous begonia seed called "Charisma" that rings in at an astounding \$200,000 an ounce.

Thankfully for home gardeners, growing your own plants from seed is substantially less expensive. It can also be an incredibly rewarding experience, but at other times it can be just plain, downright frustrating.

I remember when my husband and I first got started in market gardening back in the early 1960s. We needed a large number of tomato transplants, and obviously that required a greenhouse, so we built one—a small, plastic-covered, wood-framed structure.

Having very little seed experience, I rationalized that if I sowed double the recommended number of tomato seeds I should, at the very least, get half to grow and therefore be pretty darn close to my target.

After about a month, not one seedling had emerged. Of course, I blamed everything and everyone, including my husband, on this abysmal failure, but it wasn't until he decided to check the soil temperature that he was finally exonerated. The soil temperature was a rather frigid 50°F (that was in the pre-metric days), and tomatoes, being warm-season plants, prefer a nice warm 72°F (21°C) to germinate properly.

Installation of some heating cable solved that problem for us, but for many gardeners, poor control of soil temperature is still the primary reason for poor results.

Each year more and more gardeners are starting their own seeds, which I'm sure has been fueled in part by the tremendous satisfaction derived from successfully nurturing a plant from seed to maturity.

Undoubtedly, the adventure of trying the new, the improved and the unusual is a strong motivator as well, and never before has there been

such an extensive selection of seeds.

Yet, for many gardeners, there still exists an unwarranted fear of growing seedlings. So to minimize the trauma of starting seeds, here is the seed starter's primer in one highly condensed, nontechnical paragraph.

The first thing to do is purchase only high-quality seed (which is typically a little more expensive). Place the seed in a tray on top of premoistened soilless seedling mixture. Cover the seed lightly with horticultural-grade vermiculite (that's the small stuff). Mist the seed tray several times with a pump bottle. Cover the tray with a clear or opaque plastic cover and place the whole apparatus on a heat register or heated cable as close as possible to a south-facing window. Inspect the seed daily and mist as required.

That's all there is to it. Most seed fits rather neatly within these parameters, although, of course, there are those seeds that deviate somewhat. Some like a little warmer or a little cooler soil, some like a little more moisture or a little less moisture, but the same basic principles still apply.

Still, there are some plant species, particularly a few perennials, that can be rather obstinate. Some perennial seeds require a treatment called stratification—a one- to four-month cold treatment in moist soil to break the seeds' self-imposed dormancy. Other perennial seeds must be scarified, which is essentially delicate cutting or etching of the seed coat to allow germination, allowing water to be drawn in.

If you have seed left over when all of the spring seeding is done and you're wondering just what is the best way to store it, just remember the rule of 100. Any combination of relative humidity percentage and air temperature that exceeds 100 will reduce seed storage life. For example, if the air temperature is 60°F (sorry, this rule only works with Fahrenheit, not Celsius) and the relative humidity is 40 percent, you're in the correct range. The lower the number drops below 100, the better.

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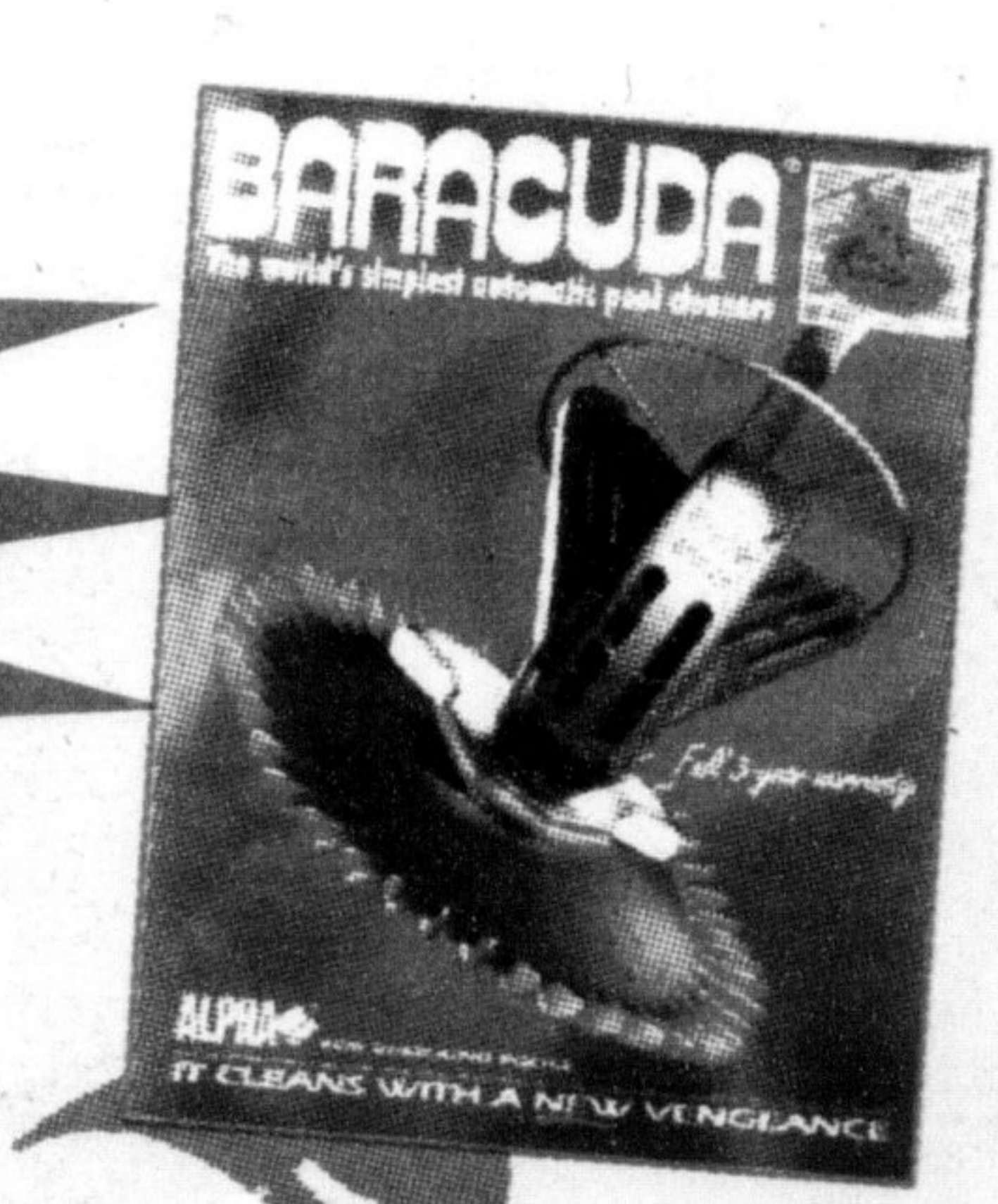
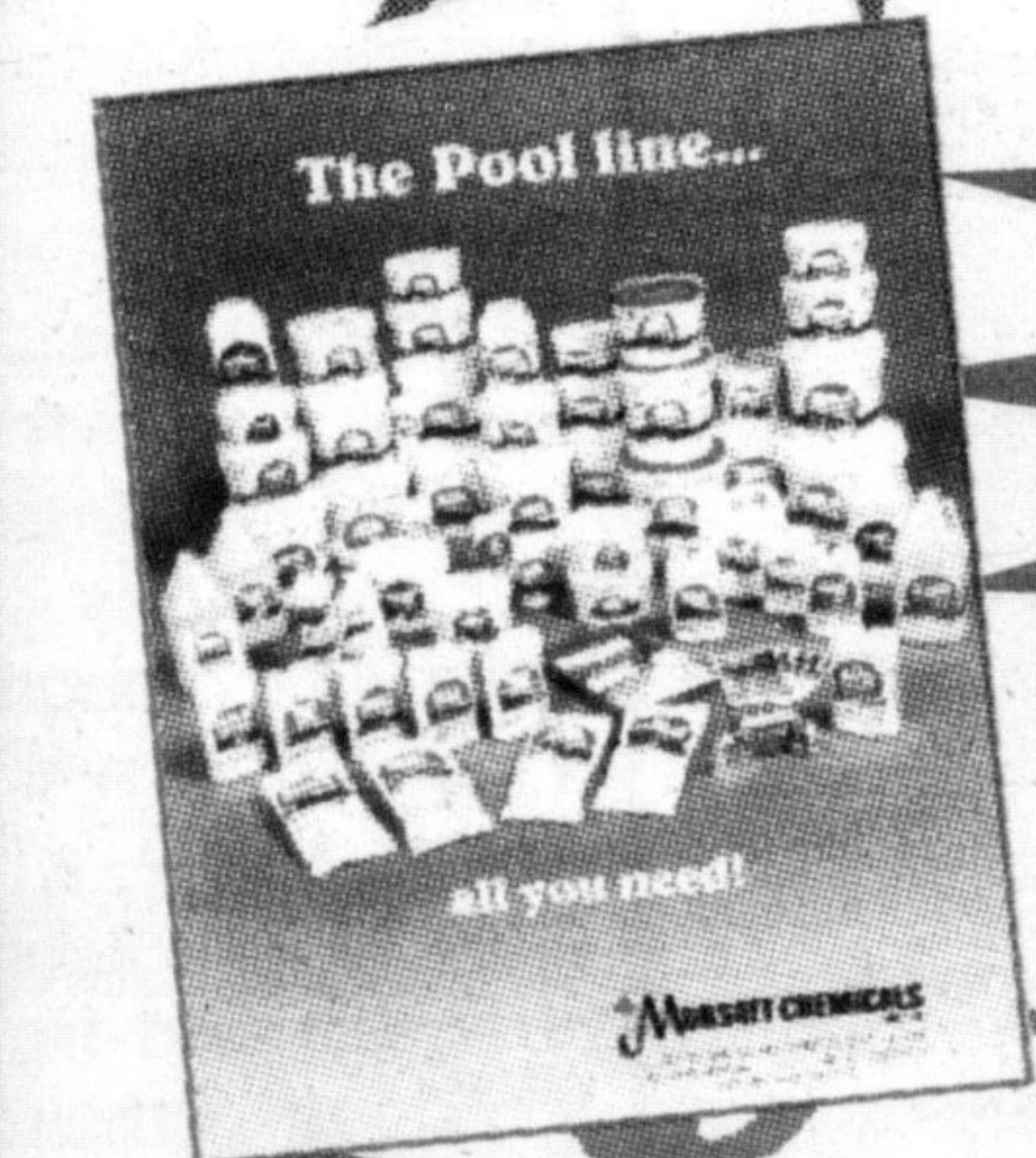
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