



# Sewing the Seeds

**A COMMUNITY FLAX GROWING PROJECT  
IN FROME, SOMERSET - OUR STORY**

## WHAT IS SEWING THE SEEDS?

**Sewing the Seeds is a collaborative community project, based in Frome, run by a group of six local textile practitioners and enthusiasts.**

We came together through the 'Everyone Needs Pockets' Textile Network. This network had started through Edventure Frome's Future Shed - part of the Green and Healthy Frome partnership project - to focus on textile reuse and clothing repair. We shared an interest in regenerative and locally produced fibres, and we had all been inspired by a workshop led by Flaxland UK in 2023, where we gained an insight into the beguiling craft of flax processing. Our small group wanted to cascade that learning to the wider community and test the viability of growing small plots of backyard flax for fibre and fashion.

The project's aims were to educate and nurture conversations around the connections between fibre, food and soil through sowing, harvesting, processing - and finally to weave a union cloth from a blend of locally grown linen and nettle fibres.

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## WHY DID IT START?

**In addition to our motivation to explore local flax production, we wanted our project to raise awareness of textile pollution and over consumption. We felt that in order to cherish a garment, you not only need to understand where it comes from and how it has been created, but also for it to be imbued with memories and positive emotions.**

This project enabled us to open a dialogue in the community around the impact of our changing climate and how this is inextricably connected to reducing textile waste, both in our small town and across the planet. We believe that growing our own textiles within our own bioregions will be fundamental in the future of fashion. Flax has the potential to cope with climate change and is being explored as a possible substitute for various fossil fuel-based products. It is very well suited to our climate and used to be grown extensively in South West England.

We wanted to grow cloth from flax seed and foraged nettle to help shift our awareness from blithe consumption towards the joy and satisfaction of learning, growing, making and cherishing what we wear, alongside the community around us.



# FROME'S TEXTILE HERITAGE

Frome is an ancient wool town with a long history of wool production, weaving and trade. We found mention of flax historically grown around Innox (a residential area in Frome), several linen drapers, plus one linen weaver amid the plethora of wool workers.

Many signs of this rich history can be found around the town to this day, through its buildings and street names. Frome Museum also holds a few flax processing tools and some artefacts made with local linen. We wanted to embrace the town's heritage, by demonstrating how cloth is made and how natural fibres support the circular regeneration of the soil and biodiversity, the same as it did in the past.

The river Frome played a big role in textile production in our town. Linking processes such as flax retting to the health of the river highlights the interconnected nature of fabric production with the land and our rivers.

How we represent ourselves with what we wear and how our clothing choices can influence the change we want to see in the world.

## WHAT WE DID

### GIVING OUT SEEDS

We purchased 70 packets seeds. 40 for fibre (flax) and 30 food (linseed) with the support of Green and Healthy Frome and launched the project at the Frome 'Potato and Seed Swap Day' in February 2024. We gave out the seeds to local residents, enabling them to plant one square metre, either in their gardens or on community plots of land. We also handed out a special zine containing information on flax, how to plant it and general information about the project. We engaged people through our display of fabric samples and fibre demonstrations - spinning with a radish on a stick was certainly a great conversation starter! We also began gathering people's contact details to form the beginnings of our e-newsletter which became a great way of sharing news and information about the project throughout the year. Through our project, 54 people took part in growing - 17 grew flax, 13 grew linseed and 24 grew both!

### MONTHLY GATHERINGS

After handing out the seeds, we began to arrange monthly gatherings and skill shares. Hosted by two members of the team, we would meet to discuss how our flax was growing, the differences in our soil and plots and how that caused variances in growth. As well as facilitating the sharing of skills and knowledge, these gatherings enriched the community aspect of our project and sparked new connections.

Regularly discussing the progress of our flax reminded us about the issues with fast fashion and how disassociated many of us are with where the fibres that make up our clothes come from. We also learnt collectively about Somerset and its historical flax production. We discussed the etymology of words in our language today that are linked to textile production, such as heckle and luddite, and how ingrained textiles and processing were in our society before the industrial revolution.



## COMMUNICATING ABOUT OUR PROJECT

We set up a dedicated Instagram account [@sewing\\_the\\_seeds\\_from](#) (900+followers), which helped to open the project up beyond Frome and we engaged in conversations with flax growers all over the world. Our email contacts also continued to increase, with both growers and others interested in following the project, so we kept people updated and shared information about the meetups, workshops, as well as growing, harvesting and processing flax through our newsletter.

We also created a shop window display of information, tools and materials for passersby in our town centre, held radio interviews on Frome FM, and published articles in our local paper, the Frome Times to raise public awareness of our project.

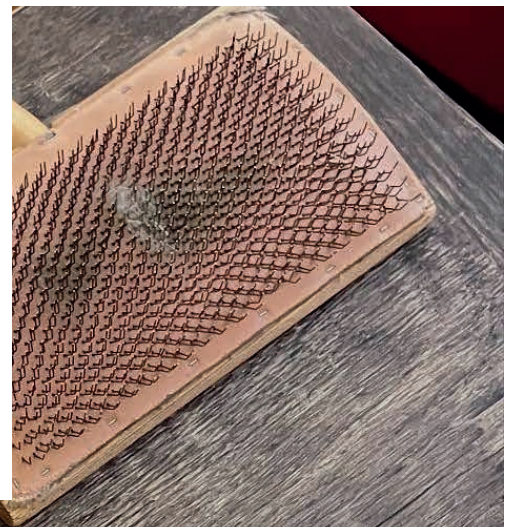
## TALKS & WORKSHOPS

As the flax grew, our project developed. Our participants became eager to acquaint themselves with textile skills that could help them to process their pending glut of flax fibre. In April we hosted a sellout talk by Flaxland UK fibre flax and linseed growers based in Stroud, at Frome Town Hall, supported by Future Shed - as well as covering historical aspects of flax, the workshop addressed the future of flax as a very sustainable crop for both food and fibre.

We secured further funding through the South West England Fibreshed to deliver a series of summer workshops:

- [Weaving with linen and grasses](#)
- [Making nettle cordage](#)
- [Smocking with linen](#)
- [Local fibres for kids](#)

This gave us the opportunity to help people to increase their understanding of how these fibres are applied in, and relevant to, our day-to-day lives. It opened conversations about how we represent ourselves with what we wear and how our clothing choices can influence the change we want to see in the world. As well as learning a new skill, these crafts naturally enhance wellbeing, social connectivity and a deeper connection with nature. We hosted 130 participants from Frome and surrounds in our workshops and talks.



## HANDWEAVING WITH LINEN AND GRASSES

We ran two weaving workshops – weaving on frame and rigid heddle looms with linen, lavender and summer grasses. Participants were fascinated to use items taken straight from the earth to weave and transform into cloth, and each created unique wall hangings.

## 'GRASPING THE NETTLE' WORKSHOP

This workshop introduced the practice of making nettle twine from scratch, through stripping, splicing, twining and plying. The workshop also informed participants about the properties and nature of nettles, including their health benefits to humans, animals and the earth. All excess plant matter was returned to the earth at the end of the session.

## SMOCKING WITH LINEN WORKSHOPS

These two workshops enabled participants to explore the techniques to create a smocked sample, using a simple and traditional honeycomb stitch. Conversations emerged about the origins of smocking, where it is used today and how it has developed over the years - and it also worked to enthuse participants with the idea of growing flax themselves.

## CHILDREN'S WORKSHOP

This workshop was designed to engage children with natural fibres, through making sketchbooks stitched with nettle fibre. The children used traditional awls to make holes in their books and then bound them with dried nettle stems, experimenting with different knotting techniques. The children loved sharing stories of falling in nettles!

## FLAXLAND WORKSHOPS

Following the successful Flaxland UK talk and combined with the demand for a better understanding of flax processing among our growers, we invited Flaxland back for two practical workshops demonstrating how to process flax into fibre. This coincided with Sustainable Fashion Week which helped to attract new people to our project.

The workshop covered: Breaking, Heckling, Scutching, Plying coarse fibre to make a simple twine and Spinning using a distaff.







## WHAT WE LEARNT

We set out to create initiatives that encouraged individual and collective responsibility to help reduce our textile waste in gentle and non-confrontational ways. Community engagement was key to making the project successful and by launching at the Seed Swap event, we put ourselves in front of our target audience and connected ourselves with the community from the outset.

### TOPICS WE DISCUSSED THROUGHOUT THE PROJECT:

- What is linen and what are its uses
- How to grow and process flax for fibre
- Issues with fast fashion
- The climate impact of synthetic fibres
- Imagining a future of growing cloth in Frome on a bigger scale
- The value of cloth in today's society with the rise of fast fashion

The key tangible outcome of this project was the successful growth of our flax on small plots of land and in some cases, simply in pots on the patio. Growers were so pleased to be able to harvest homegrown flax and there was a collective momentum that felt very important to us all.

We now have local people who are familiar with the process of planting, growing, harvesting, retting, processing and tentatively learning to spin their own flax.



## WHAT OUR PARTICIPANTS TOLD US

*'I have been utterly inspired by Sewing the Seeds. From the first time I attended one of the gatherings I felt instantly welcomed, there is so much to learn and so much varied expertise being shared. Not being a keen gardener I have embraced sewing my flax seeds & am learning a lot from the others in the group. There are too many positives to mention but what I have liked the most is that even if you lack experience in any aspect of seed to fabric or seed to food there is someone who is willing to guide you. I love it.'*

*'Such a well organised course, lovely people, everything explained so clearly and the practical side meant we could garner a better understanding for the whole process. I totally loved it.'*

*'I came away very pleased with what I'd learnt and would like to do more. It was also very lovely to meet new like-minded people who enjoy arts and craftsmanship etc - I feel inspired to learn more.'*

*'What a wonderful, surprising and beautiful session using natural material. What was even more special was meeting a lovely group of creative people and making connections.'*

## WHAT WE FOUND CHALLENGING

### OUR KEY HURDLES:

- Processing the flax into fibre is tricky and some of our growers were nervous about doing so on their own
- We had limited access to the tools required to process the fibre
- Spinning requires lots of practice and goes beyond what can be learnt in one workshop
- Not knowing the total quantity of fibre meant that it was challenging to plan a final outcome - our union cloth

Planning and managing a project where the end yield is unknown is an exciting challenge. Running the project seasonally meant the project gained pace in the summer when we were growing, holding monthly gatherings and the workshops and talks were in full swing - during the less busy times it was harder to maintain the community interest.

Working with the community can, of course, bring inconsistencies in a growing project - some people took seeds to grow, but other things got in the way, or the flax was eaten or didn't come up, or they ran out of time to sow. We had an impressive pool of people across the town growing their one metre plots, and the communal / individual harvesting and processing through the year, brought a real warmth to the gatherings and meetings.

A fundamental challenge to our project has also been spinning the flax that we have produced. Amongst us, we lack the knowledge and experience of handspinning, and when faced with large quantities of flax, this gap has become distinctly apparent. It also highlights the lack of processing infrastructure in our society generally for the processing of the flax plant into functional yarn.

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## WHAT'S NEXT FOR SEWING THE SEEDS

A year after we began, we organised a final gathering with our growers, hosted in the Edventure Hub in Frome, to provide further advice and guidance around retting and spinning - the two aspects of flax processing that people have been most cautious about. We hope that this will help everyone who has grown flax, to be able to spin their fibre into yarn with greater confidence. Many growers brought along their flax to the gathering and for the first time in the project we were able to see how much flax we had grown!

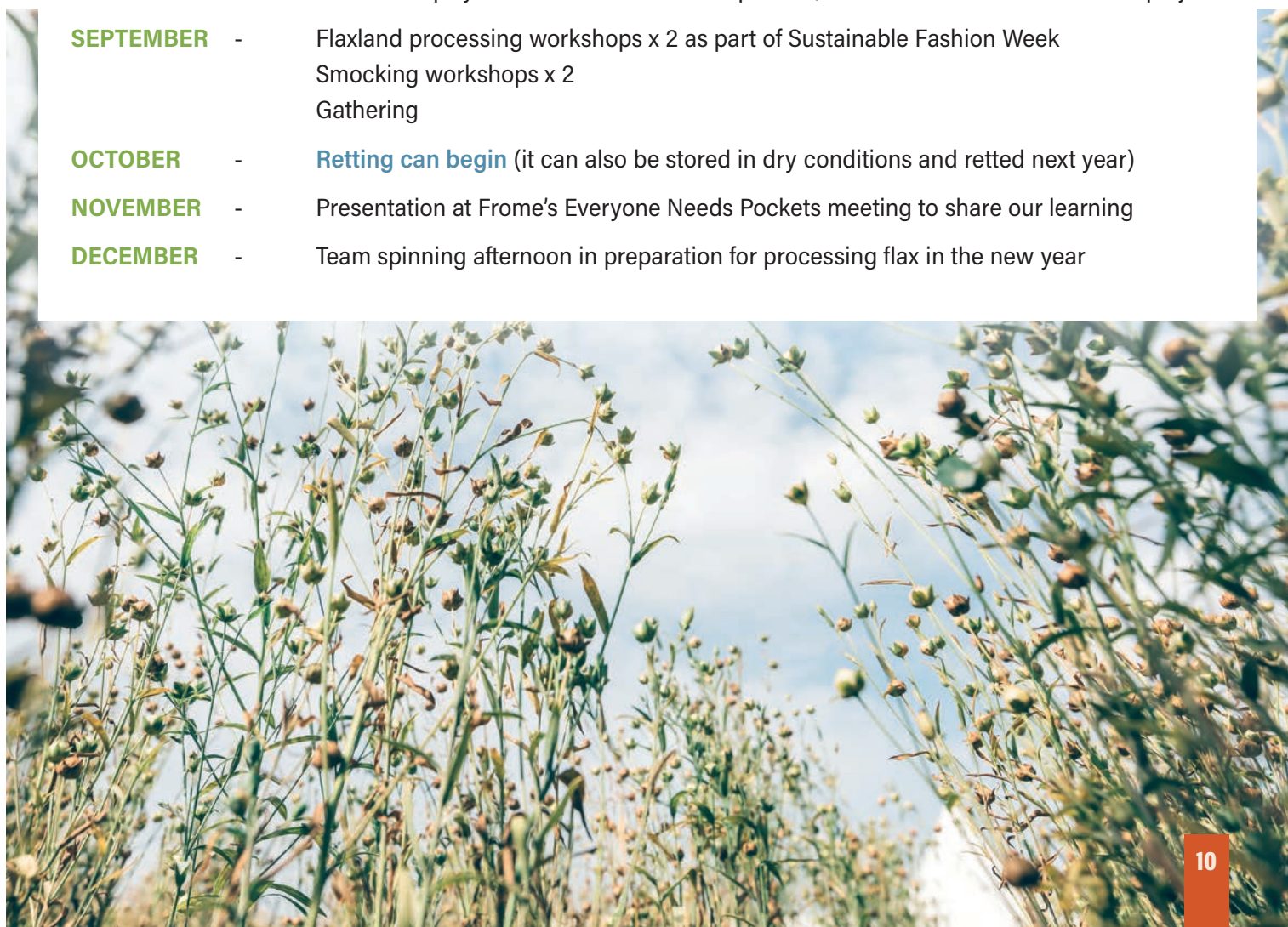
Our aim, at the time of telling our story here, is to create a piece of cloth, made with Frome-grown flax, to display somewhere in the town which can go on to inspire others towards natural, regenerative, hyper-local fibres that actively help to increase the biodiversity of our area.

Planning and managing a project where the end yield is unknown is an exciting challenge.



# 2024 - A SEWING THE SEEDS CALENDAR:

- JANUARY** - Funding applications and project planning
- FEBRUARY** - Project launch  
Seeds handed out at the Potato and Seed Swap Day
- MARCH** - Sow flax seeds
- APRIL** - Flaxland UK talk at Frome Town Hall  
Flax starting to show through the soil
- MAY** - First monthly gathering
- JUNE** - Gatherings continue  
First flax flowers beginning to appear (roughly 100 days from planting)
- JULY** - Weaving Workshops x 2  
Gathering  
Flax harvesting
- AUGUST** - Children's workshop  
Grasping the Nettle workshop  
Drying flax begins  
Rippling (taking the seeds off the dried plant)  
Gathering  
Window display at La Strada Cafe on Cheap Street, Frome to raise awareness of the project
- SEPTEMBER** - Flaxland processing workshops x 2 as part of Sustainable Fashion Week  
Smocking workshops x 2  
Gathering
- OCTOBER** - Retting can begin (it can also be stored in dry conditions and retted next year)
- NOVEMBER** - Presentation at Frome's Everyone Needs Pockets meeting to share our learning
- DECEMBER** - Team spinning afternoon in preparation for processing flax in the new year



## WHO ARE WE?

**Sewing the Seeds was coordinated and organised by a small team of local textile practitioners:**

Carolyn Griffiths, a dyer, weaver and textile curator

Jade Odgen, handweaver and artist at the Handloom Room in Somerset, and member of the South West England Fibreshed

Emily Campbell - maker and designer at Emily Campbell Studio

Katrina Beattie - glass designer, textile upcycler, and zine maker

Jan Oliver - natural fibre specialist and grower

Lucy Gundry - curator, lecturer and researcher

## WITH THANKS

**To all the fantastic volunteers and participants - too many to mention - thank you for being part of Sewing The Seeds**

Sue Palmer, Future Shed Lead at Edventure Frome

**Future Shed** [edventurefrome.org](http://edventurefrome.org)

**Everyone Needs Pockets** [everyoneneedspockets.org](http://everyoneneedspockets.org)

**Green and Healthy Frome** [greenhealthyfrome.org](http://greenhealthyfrome.org)

**Flaxland UK** [www.flaxland.co.uk](http://www.flaxland.co.uk)

**South West England Fibreshed** [southwestenglandfibreshed.co.uk](http://southwestenglandfibreshed.co.uk)

**Frome Seed Library**

**FROGS** (Frome Recreational and Open Ground Supporters)

This story of Sewing The Seeds has been written by Jade Ogden and Emily Campbell. This document has been designed by Alan Henning.

Photos are by the participants.

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Green & Healthy Frome is a partnership programme of Edventure Frome, Frome Medical Practice and Frome Town Council taking action on health, climate and the cost of living.



## THE ZINE

The Sewing the Seeds team made a zine to be handed out with the seeds. You can print it out and recreate it yourself if you like. Here's how:

Print pages 11 & 12 as a borderless double-sided A4 sheet, then follow these instructions on how to fold it. If you get confused, just look online for 'how to make a simple zine' and there are videos to show you how to fold it.

**Step 1:** Fold the paper in half lengthways. Fold it again into quarters, and then one more time so that it is folded into eighths.

**Step 2:** Open the paper out flat again, and fold in half but this time shortways (to A5). Cut halfway across the middle from the fold. When you open your paper it should have a slit running along the middle.

**Step 3:** Fold your paper lengthwise (along the crease that has the slit). Hold the paper at either end, then push the ends in toward each other. The sections should fold into each other to form an eight-page booklet.

## FLAX FACTS

- Flax fibres were the main source of cloth until the growth of the cotton industry in the 1800s.
- The flax plant is used industrially as cloth, livestock feed, fine paper manufacturing, upholstery padding
- The most popular fabric for sails from the earliest times through the mid-nineteenth century was finely woven linen made from flax. Standards for British manufactured sailcloth were enacted in 1746. A bolt of sailcloth was standardised at twenty-four inches wide by thirty-eight yards long and required British sailmakers to mark each new sail with their name.
- Heckling comes from heckle or heckle which is a tool for preparing the flax fibre for spinning.

- In Frome there are wills of several linen drapers, 1621 William Whitchurch and 1805 John Sinkins.
- The earliest evidence of humans using wild flax as a textile dates to 30,000 years and domesticated flax has been cultivated for at least 5000 years.
- Flax fibre is soft and lustrous, with the appearance of blonde hair, hence the description "flaxen" hair.
- Linseed is an excellent source of omega-3 fats, protein, fibre, several B vitamins. It is rich in thiamine, magnesium, potassium, calcium, copper and phosphorus.

## NETTLE FACTS

- Since mediaeval times, the stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) has been used for food, fibres and medicines.
- It is a plant that heralds the return of spring. In Celtic folklore, clumps of nettles indicate that there are fairy dwellings close by.
- The cultivation of nettle could provide raw materials to replace synthetic fibres in textile, construction, automotive and food industries.
- Nettle can be made into wine, soup, pesto.
- Along with flax and hemp, nettle was an important plant-based textile in Europe because it grows in northern climates.
- Nettles thrive in nitrogen rich soils which may improve soils with an excess of nitrates and phosphates.
- It promotes biodiversity providing food for native butterflies and can be grown on land unsuitable for food production.
- Written records of nettle cloth can be dated back to 1391 in Great Britain.

## SEWING THE SEEDS

**Sewing the Seeds' is an ENP collaborative community project in partnership with Frome Seed Library and Frome Food Network.**

It aims to educate and nurture conversations around the connections between fibre, food and soil, by sowing, harvesting, processing, and finally weaving a union cloth from a blend of linen and nettle fibres. With creative walks, socials and workshops, this project aims to engage the wider community to participate in growing small plots of flax in their gardens and/or public spaces and to forage nettle for food and fibre.

The project will culminate in a harvest festival to celebrate our conversations and collective efforts. We hope that this will raise awareness of our environmental interdependence, our food and textile heritage, and foster a spirit of joy for growing and making while nourishing our wellbeing.

## Sewing the Seeds



[sewingtheseedsfrome@gmail.com](mailto:sewingtheseedsfrome@gmail.com)



## SOWING INSTRUCTIONS

The seed for fibre has been supplied by Flaxland UK, while it is not organic as there are no known suppliers in the UK, it has not been dressed with any chemicals. The seed for linseed has been supplied by the Linseed Farm in Sussex.

For further information please contact us and we will chat with Simon (Flaxland) or Wendy (Linseed Farm).



- DATE PLANTED
- DATE FLOWERING
- DATE HARVESTED
- DATE AND NUMBER OF DAYS RETTED
- COMMENTS

[sewingthesedsofrome@gmail.com](mailto:sewingthesedsofrome@gmail.com)

[@sewing\\_the\\_seeds\\_from\\_e](https://www.instagram.com/sewing_the_seeds_from_e)



Flax and linseed are varieties of the same species of *Linum usitatissimum* meaning most useful. Flax is a taller variety grown for fibre. We are supplying you with 15g of seed to produce about 2000 stems of fibre and/or linseed 6g which is a short variety with a high seed yield both can be grown in an area up to 1 square metre.

Flax is planted late March early April, it will grow well in most soils in full sun. For the best results, you need to establish an equally spaced crop so the seed can germinate evenly and make hand harvesting easier. Seeds germinate in about ten days.

Flax grows best planted in a block, mark out a metre square on the ground. Prepare the soil and rake the surface to create a fine tilth, or use 'no dig' method. Sow 25mm deep in rows about 125mm apart making 8 rows to the square metre. Use a board 12.5cm x 80cm wide to mark the rows and use the edge to create the 25mm depth.

The seed is small, so fold an A4 piece of paper into 8 sections and divide the seed into equal piles. Sprinkle each pile as evenly as possible across each row. Cover with soil and tamp down the ground. The aim is to grow approximately 2000 plants close together so they support each other to grow as tall as possible without branching.

Linseed for seed and oils, can be broadcast rather than drilled and raked into a depth of 25mm, sow approx 4g, 600 seeds to a square metre. The plants, with 4x as many seeds as the fibre, will be branched and grow approximately 50cm tall.

Flax grows rapidly and should not need watering once established, but may need watering if the weather is particularly dry until plants are about 5in tall. Flax stalks are too thin to 'suppress' weeds, but they will eventually outcompete them, so may need some weeding throughout the growing season. The plant is self pollinating and starts to produce blue flowers at the end of June. The fibre plant will be harvested approximately 6 weeks after flowering.



## All the work to grow and harvest flax is done by hand.

## EVENTS / ACTIVITIES

As the project progresses, we will have talks, get together and emails about harvesting, retting and processing the flax, linseed and nettles.

To keep up to date and informed, please follow us on Instagram or [www.everyoneneeds pockets.org](https://www.everyoneneeds pockets.org).



[@sewing\\_the\\_seeds\\_from\\_e](https://www.instagram.com/sewing_the_seeds_from_e)  
[www.everyoneneeds pockets.org/projects](https://www.everyoneneeds pockets.org/projects)

## SOME RESOURCES

[Flaxland.co.uk](https://Flaxland.co.uk)  
[TheLinseedFarm.co.uk](https://TheLinseedFarm.co.uk)  
[SouthwestEnglandFibreshed.co.uk](https://SouthwestEnglandFibreshed.co.uk)  
[NettlesforTextiles.org.uk](https://NettlesforTextiles.org.uk)  
[UlsterLinen.com](https://UlsterLinen.com)  
[Fibreshed.org.uk](https://Fibreshed.org.uk)  
[Nfmf.org.uk](https://Nfmf.org.uk)  
[OurLinenStories.com](https://OurLinenStories.com)  
[Hejgro.co.uk](https://Hejgro.co.uk)  
[CharlesDowding.co.uk](https://CharlesDowding.co.uk)  
**OTHER COMMUNITY FLAX PROJECTS**  
[FlaxProject.uk](https://FlaxProject.uk)  
[Field of flax.co.uk](https://FieldofFlax.co.uk)  
[Bertas-flachs.at](https://Bertas-flachs.at)  
[@straw\\_into\\_gold](https://@straw_into_gold)