

Seed Starting 101

A. Why start plants from seed?

Starting from seed allows you to extend the growing season; which is especially useful with our short season here in the Tri-Lakes area. It also allows you the opportunity to experiment with different varieties of flowers or vegetables that may not be available anywhere else. And the cost savings can be significant. Additionally, there are some plants which must be direct seeded, as they don't transplant well.

B. Timing is important.

Seeds packets will give you the germination, transplanting, and blooming/harvesting timeline for that particular plant. Starting seeds at the right time will ensure your plants will provide you with the flowers or fruit/veggie that you want. Starting too early may lead to plants getting too leggy or becoming root bound; start too late and you won't get the blooms or fruit production in time.

It can be helpful to use a chart to plan things out. Knowing when it is safe to put transplants out will help you 'backward plan' when to start the seeds indoors.

C. Gather Supplies.

Determine how many containers you need for the plants you've selected. Peat/Coconut Coir pots, cell packs, pots, egg cartons, TP tubes, etc. (as long as it will allow for at least 2 inches of soil), will all work. Remember to have trays underneath your containers for drainage. If reusing containers, always make sure you disinfect with a bleach/water solution! You don't want to introduce any diseases/insects that may have overwintered in them.

Seed starting mixes are best; they are lighter and better draining, allowing young roots to grow freely. Always use fresh planting mix for seeds.

Determine if you need supplemental lighting or heat. Grow lights and heat mats can greatly improve germination. Too cool and seeds will germinate much slower; too little light and they will grow spindly and weak. Most seeds want 12-14 hours of light and temperatures of at least 65 for best germination.

D. Plant your Seeds!

Always moisten seed starting mix prior to planting; this will keep the seed from being dislodged when planted.

It's important to read all seed packet instructions ahead of time to determine if there are any special requirements, such as soaking seeds, prior to seeding. Fill your containers with the pre-moistened mix, and sow 2-3 seeds per cell at the depth indicated on the seed packet.

Cover the containers with a plastic dome or plastic wrap, removing the cover when seedlings emerge. Check your containers daily, and water as needed. It is a good idea to use a mister rather than a watering can; watering too heavily can dislodge the seed, or damage the seedling.

E. Care and Feeding of Seedlings

Once 'true' leaves have formed on your seedlings, feed them with a quarter strength, water-soluble fertilizer.

Some plants may require 'potting up' before being able to be transplanted outside. Plants that are outgrowing their containers should be transplanted to larger containers to prevent them becoming root-bound or getting too leggy.

Once seedlings are well-established, thin out the weakest in each cell to give the stronger one room to grow.

F. Introducing your plants to the great outdoors.

Plants need to be introduced to the outdoors gradually. Begin by placing them in a sheltered location (out of the wind and direct sun), gradually increasing, daily, the amount of time they are outside. After 4-5 days, begin exposing them to more and more sunlight each day until they are eventually staying out all day. If night time temperatures cooperate, (50 degrees, ideally) by the end of the hardening off period they should be ready to spend the night outside.

After your plants have been hardened off, they are ready to be transplanted to a garden bed or container. Keep in mind that young plants will still need to be protected from the wind or cool nights for a while. Water walls, milk jugs, 2 liter bottles, etc, can all be used to shelter and protect young transplants.

G. Common Problems and Solutions

1. **Seeds don't sprout:** Seeds were planted too deep, were old, or were improperly stored (exposed to temperature extremes) prior to planting; or planting mix was too wet causing seeds to rot.
2. **Seeds sprouted, then suddenly one day they keeled over and died:** Damping off, a fungal disease. Caused by over watering, and/or using old containers that weren't sterilized prior to use.
3. **Seedlings are tall, pale, and spindly:** Not enough light. Move lights closer to plant tray and increase time of exposure.
4. **Tiny, dark flies show up:** Fungus gnats; a result of over watering. Use sticky traps and/or pesticides.
5. **Once transplanted to the garden, they wilted and developed brown patches on the leaves:** Plants were not properly hardened off prior to setting out and were sunburned

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