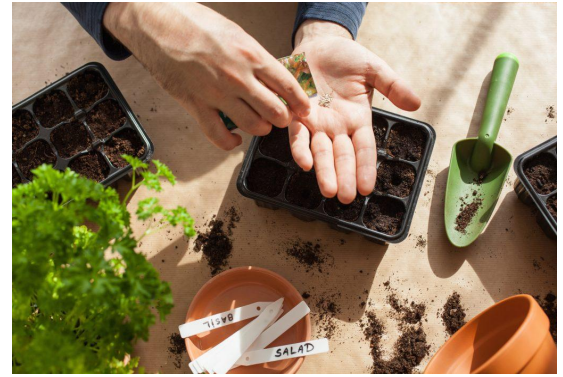


Seed Starting

A Garden Guide

Growing plants from seed can be fun, educational, and economical. There is nothing quite like growing vibrant, healthy plants from little seeds once held in your hand. With a little patience, good cultural practices, and attention to detail, it is possible to grow beautiful plants and vegetable varieties successfully from seed.



Timing and **Record Keeping**: In our region, the traditional last frost date is Mother's Day, however farmers and gardeners have noticed that this has been shifting. Take the frost date into account when planning when to start your seeds. Warm season plants, such as tomatoes and peppers, will need to be indoors or in a heated greenhouse until the frosts have passed. Seed packets and good seed catalogs will provide information on when to plant the seeds. Look at a calendar and count back from the date you want to plant outside. Record your target planting date, as well as the date seeds are sown on the seed packet in your gardening journal, and/or on a tag kept with the plant. Seed packets can degrade when wet, so recording this information in multiple places is advisable. It's best to sow extra seeds, because the germination rate isn't typically 100%. A good rule of thumb is 70-80% germination. Extra seedlings can always be given to family, friends, community gardens, and some local food banks will also accept them.

Containers: Biodegradable containers, folded newspaper, open flats, "Jiffy" peat pots and pellets, cell packs, egg cartons, old toilet paper rolls and more can all be used. The main things to consider are drainage, portability, and depth. For most plants, they need to be ~1 ½ - 2" deep and have drainage holes in the bottom. If you need to carry the seedling trays in and out, a firm bottom surface is important. If the tray twists, it's possible the soil will crack and delicate seedlings become damaged. Another consideration is covering the trays. There are clear plastic domes which fit over a standard size nursery flat, or plastic wrap can be used.

Heat: Seeds will germinate better if a heat mat is used, or if kept in a sunny spot all day. At our farm, the germination time is much faster when started on heat mats. The mat needs to be very flat, so the bottom of the container touches the mat evenly.

Soil: Use seed germinating mixes. These are very light and fluffy.

Watering: Once the soil is in your containers, water it in and let drain for a few minutes. If the soil is very dry, it may take a couple of waterings to thoroughly soak in. After seeds are planted, use a very light spray with a spray bottle, mister, or watering can. A heavy stream of water can easily dislodge the seeds you just planted.

Sowing: Ideally, the seed packet will explain how deeply to plant. A general rule of thumb is to plant 3x as deep as the size of the seed, however some seeds need light to germinate. If necessary, gently sprinkle a thin layer of soil on top. Spray lightly with water to let seed settle in, then cover with clear plastic dome or plastic wrap.

Germination: Consult seed packets for estimated time until germination. Keep the soil moist, but not soggy. Covering the flat with a dome will help hold moisture for a couple of days. After you are rewarded with little green sprouts, remove the dome.



This is the time when light is most important. **Grow lights** can be used, or keep seedlings in an extremely sunny window. If your sprouts are leggy and leaning towards light, they need more. This needs to be corrected as soon as possible - if not, you'll have to start over with fresh seeds. **Fans** are helpful for preventing disease and strengthening stems.

The time from sowing to transplanting is fairly short – 2-3 weeks. This is the most critical stage, where **daily attention is important**. Fragile seedlings can easily die.

Transplanting: If you need to transplant into a larger container, it's best to wait until the second set of leaves, or "true leaves" are developing. Gently remove the seedling from its container by pressing from the bottom. Handle VERY carefully by the top leaves or root ball, taking care not to touch the tender stem. Water in, and begin using a weak fertilizer solution once a week. Thin using scissors to cut off tops.

During this time the plants can be taken outside and left in a protected area (away from wind). If temperatures drop below 50 at night, bring into an unheated garage or a cool place inside your home. Water as needed, usually once or even twice a day.

When roots fill the container, you're ready to plant outside!

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