

HORTICULTURE TIPS: Feb. 11, 2015 Pepperell Garden Club from Jeanne Nevard, some information adapted from Shelia Steele, Amherst Garden Club

Seed Starting Basics:



Why start your own seedlings?

It is inexpensive, you will save money on mature, purchased plants, you can find unusual varieties and heirloom seeds, you don't have to search for a specific color or form at the nursery, and you can experience the joy of growing a plant from its birth.

Here is what you will need:

Seeds- There are so many companies and seeds now available. Choose what you like and experiment! Several local stores already have good supplies- Bedford Fields, Agway, County Stores, Home Depot are a few. Johnny's seed company in Maine is a really good source of hardy seeds all tested for growth in New England. Do not use outdated seeds as you will be disappointed with their germination rates. Read the sowing information on each packet. However, if you *do* want to take a chance, certain vegetables do have a long period of viability, such as: cauliflower- up to 5 years, tomatoes & pumpkins- 4 years, and peas- 3 years. This is as long as it is stored well in a cool, dry place. Some seeds also need to go through a cold period before sowing.

Soil- Choose a high quality **seedling starting soil**. The soil needs to be fluffy and fine so the seeds can easily poke through the soil. Starting soils are sterilized to prevent fungi and molds from attacking tender shoots! Always presoak the soil with water before putting seeds in as it takes a while for the soil to absorb water. Set soil up in containers, soak with water, wait and then plant seeds after soil is moist all the way through. It is best to use seed flats or other containers with good drainage.

Light- You need to plant seeds and put in a south, very sunny window! If you do not have adequate light the seedlings will be spindly and weak and will develop long stems, few leaves and will lean to the light. You can use artificial lights- fluorescent or LED but they need to be placed 6 inches from seedlings and for 12 hours a day.

Warmth- Seeds germinate at different temperatures but using a seedling heat mat under your trays to speed up germination times if desired. These can be purchased from local hardware stores or on line (Gardener's Supply, etc). If you do not have a seed mat, you can wrap a heating pad in a towel and use that! Or, place the trays in a warm area for quicker results!

Water- Moisture is essential of course and there is a fine balance between too much and too little. Some people like to use a plastic cover over their trays but I have found that often this creates too much moisture. Diligence in keeping the seed trays moist works well and you need to have a watering can with a really fine attachment on it or you will flood your little baby seedlings and seeds!

Patience – Seed starting is great fun but involves a bit of trial and error just like gardening. Experiment with different seed types- some are much easier than others! Just starting out? Here are *a few sure bets*: marigolds, morning glories, basil, lettuce, herbs, cukes and squashes (they germinate fast- so do not plant too early!).

TIPS:

-Pay attention to the charts on the back of the seed packets for growth times, If started too early- they get too big for their containers and your house.

-Harden off your seeds- It is so very tempting to take them from the house and plunk into ground. They need to be gradually introduced to the outside world. If you have one- use a cold frame, or carry them in & out gradually to adapt to cooler temperatures.

-Do not plant the seedlings outside too early! Heed frost warnings!

-Be careful of watering practices, lack of light or lack of air flow- can lead to damping off disease, a soil pathogen that collapses the seedling at the root.

-Also, if overwatered, this could lead to botrytis a soil borne fungal disease which looks like grey or white fuzz. You can try to scrape it off, use a fungicide, or toss away. Do not leave the plants sitting in water.

-It is fun and interesting to start seeds and children love to help.

For more, detailed information research it online. Seed catalogs are online as well.