



## **Seed Starting by Erika Stewart**

We are moving toward that wonderful time of year when we can start our vegetable gardens. Considering the price of produce, growing your own vegetables from seed is good economy. I'll share some tips I've learned over the years to help you maximize success.

You will need containers, soilless seed starting mix or peat moss, potting soil, and seeds. The containers can be purchased or use things you have on hand; yogurt cups, cottage cheeses containers, or anything that can hold soil. Put drainage holes in your home-made containers.

Fill the potting containers 2/3 full of potting soil, then fill the top 1/3 of the container with soilless seed starting mix. The seedlings' roots will grow through the seed starting mix down into the nutrient rich potting soil and the plants can stay in these pots until time to transfer into the garden.

To increase your seed starting success, water from the bottom, not the top. This helps to avoid "damping off" where the plant's stem rots right at the soil line. To bottom water, set the plant pots into a plant tray that will hold water. Pour ½ inch of water into the tray and allow the plants to soak for about an hour, then remove them.

Your plant pots need to be in the brightest light you can provide. Using a sunny windowsill would be fine if we had enough sun in March and April. We don't. You will need to provide light. You don't need a special grow light; fluorescent shop light will work fine. If you have a wire self-unit, you can attach the shop light to the underside of a shelf with

twine and put your plant starts on the next shelf down. Your plants will love it. Keep the light on 16 hour a day and turn off at night.

Finally, your plants are ready to move to a prepared garden bed when they have two sets of true leaves. The first two leaves to emerge are cotyledon and don't count as true leaves. Before planting them into the garden, harden the plants off. Set the pots outside during the day and slowly acclimate them to sun, wind, and outdoor temperatures. After a few days of this treatment, they can be moved to the garden. Choose a cloudy day or early evening for putting them into the ground. Using a transplant technique called "mudding in" will eliminate transplant shock. Dig a hole, put the plant into the hole, fill the hole with water and push the soil back around the plant even before the water has soaked in. Don't forget the slug bait. Slugs love tender seedlings.

Happy planting!

Learn more about gardening at WSU Mason County Master Gardener workshops starting in January. Topics such as vegetable growing, drought tolerant plants, tree pruning & landscaping. Visit [mgfmc.org](http://mgfmc.org) for workshop details, Facebook Mason County Master Gardeners or call 360-427-9670 ext.682.

Erika Stewart is a Mason County Master Gardener. She volunteers on the Education committee and has given several workshops on growing vegetable gardens. She is part of the team at Catalyst Food Bank garden, a contributing writer and all around garden expert.

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