

Protecting Young Plants

The days are getting longer and a few sunny days in early April rev up spring fever and entice one out into the garden. These teaser spring days are great opportunities to get back outside and start getting the beds ready for new plants and seeds. Whether starting spring vegetables and flowers from seed or purchasing them at a nursery, here are some ideas and techniques to get young plants off to a healthy and hardy start.

Sun boxes, variations on cold frames, can be used to jump start planting. A cover may consist of an old wood-framed storm window or door. Use inexpensive 2 x 4's or 2 x 6's and cut a frame that fits your cover. Several of these frames can be stacked as plants grow taller and used alone to help warm the soil. If old storm windows can't be found, use plastic as a top cover. The plastic may be tucked in underneath the frame and rolled back for ventilation. These boxes are designed to be quite portable and moved around as needed. Try using one of these boxes to warm up your perennial beds. Since healthy germination depends on warmer soil temperatures, this technique is a quick way to get growing.

The sun box is a good place to harden off plant starts purchased from a nursery, grown inside, or in a greenhouse. Two weeks before setting plants in their permanent spot, begin increasing their exposure to outside temperatures. If a cold frame or sun box is not available, use a protected part of the garden for this project - possibly an area next to the house or a protected wall.



Out in the garden, young plants can act as a magnet for animals and insects. In our cool moist environment, young leaves create a smorgasbord for slugs. Early spring can also bring iffy weather – late frosts, hail, and heavy rain. Cloches, which are transparent, generally dome shaped plant covers, can be used to protect against inclement weather, insulate the plant, and deter leaf munchers. Cloches can be purchased from most garden catalogs or nurseries, or they can be made by simply cutting off the bottom of a clear plastic soda bottle. Place the cloche over the plant. Try to keep the leaves from touching the sides. Use landscape staples or a stake to anchor the cloche to the ground to prevent wind from taking it airborne.

Another easy way to protect young plants is with a wire cage. Tomato cage wire is the most versatile material, although chicken wire or any other means of framing a box can be used. Bend the wire into a three sided cage and wrap the cage with plastic. Clothes pins or bulldog clips can be used to secure the plastic to the structure. Poke drainage holes in the top to prevent water from pooling, or shape the top into a dome. Many hardware stores and garden centers carry a material called "instant greenhouse". It is a clear plastic embedded with wire mesh. Use two pieces, bend the ends down and place them at right angles to each other to form a 4 sided enclosure. These structures will protect newly planted seeds or transplants from strong winds and harsh rains. The plastic will let the sun in and keep the varmints out. The plain wire cages can do double duty later in the

season covered with netting to protect from birds or shade cloth to keep cool season lettuces from bolting. If rodents or burrowing animals tend to feast on your root crops, try burying the cage upside down with about two inches extending above ground. Cover the exposed sharp edges with sturdy tape to prevent injury.

Without greenhouse conditions, early tomatoes are a pipedream for most Northwest gardeners. However, devices, such as "wallo' water", surround the plant with tubes of water. The sun heats up the water in the tubes to create a mini-greenhouse and protect your plant. Many catalogs and garden centers offer these products. A similar effect can be obtained by surrounding your plant with plastic soda bottles filled with water. Even an upside down tomato cage wrapped with plastic or saran wrap can create mini-greenhouse environment.

The above suggestions are just a few ways to get a head start on the growing season. It should be apparent that warming up the soil is one of the best advantages a gardener can provide young plants.



A simple, three-sided cage can be made from tomato cage wire. This protective cage measures 12 inches on each side and fits easily over a square. It can support a variety of protective coverings.

References

Bartholomew, Mel. *Square Foot Gardening*. Emmaus: Rodale Press, 1981.