

Starting Seeds Indoors Part One

Why Bother?

- Extending the growing season is one of a number of reasons that gardeners start seeds indoors. To grow vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers and eggplants in the Pacific Northwest, one must either start from seed or obtain plants from friends or purchase them.
- Choosing to start plants from seed offers the gardener a greater selection of cultivars than most local nurseries provide, and one can mull over the choices for a long time before ordering, thus providing some winter entertainment.
- For seeds which succeed either planted indoors or out, germination and survival rates will typically be better in the controlled (indoor) environment.
- Starting plants from seed is a satisfying hobby for some people (and, let's admit it, a passion for others). The gardener's role in the process is not that difficult, especially compared to what nature does!

Selecting the Seeds

For help in deciding which seeds to start indoors, use good gardening books, catalogs, magazines and internet sites, as well as discussions with other gardeners (preferably local ones). You will need to know whether a specific plant which you are considering should even be started from seed indoors. Carrots? Don't bother - they're better planted in situ. Leaf lettuce? Sure. It can be planted in situ, but there are good reasons to start lettuce seeds indoors. Look to your information sources again to help you select a variety. In the case of leaf lettuce, taste, color, days to maturity and cold-hardiness or tendency to bolt might all be factors to consider as you decide which variety to buy. It's often wise to start two varieties - one that is tried-and-true, another that is new to you.

The Seed-Starting Mix

The medium you purchase or mix for starting your seeds must provide an open enough structure that emerging roots and shoots can move easily, yet a dense enough structure to support the seedling. It must be stable enough that it will remain in good condition at least until it is time to "pot on", as the Brits say. It must hold and retain high water levels, yet never become waterlogged. It must be porous enough that oxygen can diffuse freely even when the mix is saturated with water. It must be able to be easily remoistened after drying out. It must be transparent enough that light reaches the seeds buried beneath the surface.

Using plain garden soil for starting seeds indoors is not advisable, as it is not "fluffy" enough to ease the movement of the seedlings' roots and shoots. A lightweight mix prepared specifically for seed starting usually combines some or all of these ingredients - peat moss, perlite, milled sphagnum moss; the mix should be able to hold just enough water for the purpose. Because of current warnings about the possibility of vermiculite containing hazardous asbestos, we urge you to inform yourself as to the ingredients of your seed-starting mix and avoid

using one containing vermiculite. Always use surgical-type gloves when handling any potting mix, and a mask, especially when working with dry mixes.

Equipment

The container you choose for seed-starting must drain well and should be at least two inches deep, so that it can hold one to two inches of the starting medium. Too deep a container requires excessive use of the seed-starting mix. (If you must use a deep container, use potting soil at the bottom, topped with two inches of seed-starting mix.)

Use a separate container for each type of seed, so that you can remove a container from the germinating area once the seeds are up and need more light. Many gardeners reuse or purchase "six-packs". Recycled yogurt, margarine, cottage cheese, or deli containers must have drainage holes punched in the bottom. Round containers don't use space as efficiently as square ones. To prevent problems with "damping off" (a disease that often kills seedlings), sterilize previously used containers in a weak solution of liquid laundry bleach (one part bleach to nine parts water) for fifteen minutes or so. Place your containers of choice in trays for easy watering from the bottom and to catch drips.

Purchase wooden or plastic labels or make your own by cutting up white plastic containers or discarded Venetian blinds. Masking tape may work for you if you are using separate containers for each type of seed. Test it to make sure it will adhere to the surface of the container, even in a moist environment. You may wish to use the label for more information than the variety name - e.g., date transplanted, date fed.

Recommended Reading

Buchanan, Rita. "Starting with Seeds". Fine Gardening magazine, January/February 1989.

Gershuny, Grace. Start with the Soil. Emmaus, Pa: Rodale Press, 1993.

Malloy, Janie. "Seed Starting Strategies". Kitchen Garden magazine, February/March 1998, pp. 61-63.

Meyer, Scott. "Simplified Seed-Starting". Organic Gardening magazine, February 1995, pp. 64-67.

Thompson, Peter. Creative Propagation. Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1989, 1992,

Williams, Sara. "Growing Now: Starting Seeds Indoors", "Starting Seeds Indoors, Parts 2, 3 and 4".