

Jump Start Your Vegetables

Milk jugs can become a free greenhouse with a sharp knife and some duct tape.

by Diana Pieti and Claudia Steen for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

This week is another late winter gardening project that will satisfy your need for planting something, though it does not get food on your table as quickly as the microgreens.

Last February some of our fellow Master Gardener members did some winter seed sowing in plastic gallon jugs. When we first saw this done, we were skeptics, but it does work.

First, rinse out your gallon milk jugs and dispose of the lids. Next, put drainage holes in the bottom by using a sharp object or cutting slits with a knife.

To give access to the planting area, cut the jugs horizontally about 4-6 inches from the bottom by using a box cutter, but stop when you get to the side with the handle, because that becomes the hinge. Now open them and fill the bottom section almost to

The common plastic milk jug may not be pretty, but it is surprisingly effective as a mini greenhouse.

DIANA PIETI PHOTO



the top with potting soil. Wet it well and pat it down a bit.

Now go through last year's seed stash and look for some seeds you want to get planted early. The Brassica family such as cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower will be the most successful. But don't stop there; be adventurous. Choose what your family likes to eat, but do not use tender seeds such as tomatoes or peppers if you plant to place the jugs outside.

Scatter seeds over the top of your soil, add a thin sprinkling of soil, and pat in place. Dampen the soil by using a spray bottle. Now replace the top and tape it shut with tape, such as duct tape, label them with the vegetable, and take them outside. Choose a spot that will get full sun and let them do their thing. You will not need to water them unless we get extremely dry weather, which is unlikely this early in the year. This should give you a head start on your spring planting. Try it, and get the kids involved for this fun project. It works.

For more information Google “Winter Seed Sowing in Gallon Jugs” and you will find information and videos that take you step by step.

Or be traditional

If that does not appeal to you, there is always the traditional way of starting your seeds indoors. You can transplant them into the garden or container at the appropriate time for your area. Another advantage of growing your own transplants is that you get to choose the specific varieties you want for each crop instead of being limited to the varieties available in stores.

Start seeds under controlled conditions indoors where they have no competition from weeds and aren't likely to suffer from inclement weather. In fact, due to the limited length of our growing season, many

crops such as tomatoes, eggplant, sweet potatoes, melons, peppers, cucumbers, summer and winter squash need to be started indoors if you hope to have them ripen before the early frost.

Packets of vegetable seeds are available this month in many grocery, hardware, and garden stores. Be sure to read the back of the packet that contains actual growing information such as when to sow, days to harvest, and amount of sunlight needed. It's also best to verify that they are fresh seeds marked for 2022 planting.

Keep in mind that "last frost" dates tend to be too general for our area. Most of Yakima County has a last frost date of May 11 to May 20, but some colder areas may have frost into June. Determine when to sow each vegetable's seeds by checking the seed packet for the recommended date for planting in the garden in your area. Count backwards on your calendar the approximate number of weeks needed to grow that vegetable. Do not seed too early, as plants can become root-bound in their pots or become leggy, and this can delay their establishment in the garden after transplanting. Days to harvest assumes ideal weather conditions. If summers are cooler than normal, you may need to add 50% more days for fruit and flower-bearing crops.

Amount of sunlight needed is critical. Vegetables need a long period of sunlight. "Full sun" means the plant needs at least six hours of direct sun each day. "Part sun" indicates the plant needs at least three hours of sun each day. "Part shade" plants need about three hours of morning sun with shade relief during the heat of the day.

When the timing is right, gather the pots that you kept from last year's starters, assure they are clean, add potting soil and place 1-3 seeds per pot spread out on top of the soil. Seeds that are past their recommended planting time, have a lower germination rate so you may have to plant more seeds. Cover with a little potting soil and pat down so

good contact is made. Be sure and label each pot which can be done by putting a written label on the side or even a tongue depressor or plastic marker with the name of the veggie. Place all the finished pots onto a tray and assure they are well watered. Place the tray in a south facing window location and assure they are kept moist. As you see the seeds begin to sprout, nurture the plants until they are ready to be planted into your garden or containers. There you can look forward to eating those healthy vegetables as they mature.

