

Secrets of seed starting

This is meant as a guide to starting your seeds. It's a good idea to do some research on particular seeds. Starting your own seeds offer you a lot more variety than buying seedlings from a store. You will know that your seeds have been started organically and have been properly cared for. It's a great activity for the whole family.

Seeds

Buy from reputable source, organic, non GMO and heirloom if possible.

Find out how to start a particular seed: light or dark, stratified (cold& moist for a length of time, refrigerator), scarified (seed coat nicked/soaked before planting). Will it need to be in a peat pot to avoid transplant shock?

Always start a few more seeds than you think you'll want. If they all survive you can pass them along to friends or neighbors.

Soil and containers

You can use trays and cell packs bought from the store. Some people use recycled containers (egg cartons, yoghurt tubs, egg shells). You can use newspaper that you've turned into a pot by using a small can (tomato paste). Others use peat pellets or make blocks with special equipment. Just make sure that the containers can drain when they're watered.

The best mix is a soilless mix, usually peat moss/coir and vermiculite (half and half). Some mixes have compost added. Pro Mix now makes an organic seed starting mix.

Moisten your soil before planting your seeds. It should not be sopping wet.

Fill each cell and tap on a hard surface to remove air pockets. You don't need to pack the soil.

Cover your seed at the required depth. Your seed packet will have that information. The smaller the seed the less covering it will require. Don't pack the soil.

Add a tsp. or two of cinnamon to the mix. You can sprinkle some directly on top of the soil as well to prevent damping off. You can also use cayenne, turmeric or clove to sprinkle on top. These spices have anti fungal properties.

Water

Water from the bottom not the top. Or you can use a spray bottle to mist you seedlings. You can make a spice tea: 1tbsp. of cloves/cinnamon/turmeric in 1 cup of water. Simmer for 5 minutes, strain and use once a week to help prevent damping off. Tepid chamomile tea also works.

Care

Don't start your plants too early or you'll have to transplant them before they go outside. Check your seed packet for specific start times. Onions can be started early (you can trim them when they get long). Some flower seeds (petunias, geraniums, pansies) are slow growing and can be started early.

The use of a heat mat really speeds up the germination of seeds. Once the seedlings are up, you should remove them from the heat mat. Seedling should still be in a warm room though. If you use a window, try to put them on a table in front of that window. It gets cold at night and that may slow the sprouting process. Once your seeds have sprouted, rotate your seedling so they're not stretching to reach the light. Make sure you cover your planter with plastic to simulate the warm, moist environment of spring. As soon as your seeds have germinated remove the plastic covering. Water from the bottom or mist your seedlings. Using a grow light prevents leggy seedlings. Keep your seedling about an inch or so from the light source and adjust accordingly. If you have multiple seedlings in one cell remove all but the strongest looking one. Use small scissors to do so instead of pulling out the unwanted seedlings. This will prevent damage to the remaining seedling. The seedlings don't need to be fertilized till they have their first true leaves. Use half strength organic fertilizer (fish emulsion 1-2-1) once a week. Use tepid not cold water.

Transplanting outside

Once the weather has warmed up you can start putting your seedling outside for a short period (start with an hour). Put them out of direct sun. Increase the time over a week. Make sure your soil has been prepared adequately for your seedlings (turned over and has had compost added). It's really good if you can plant after a rainfall and on an overcast day. You may need to use a row cover to protect your newly planted seedling. You can use "collars" made from recycled materials (toilet rolls, plastic cups or bottles) to prevent cutworms or slugs from getting at your new seedlings.

With proper care, you should have a bountiful garden. Keep in mind that even experienced gardeners sometimes have failures with some seeds or transplants. It's not always an exact science and many variables come into play, although the process is always an exciting and rewarding one.

Happy gardening!