Growing Healthy Seedlings Indoors



Article

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Follow these simple tips on how to grow a garden from seeds to increase your chances of success.

QUICK START GUIDE (DETAILED STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS BELOW)

1. Fill planting container(s) with moistened organic seed starting mix.
2. Read your seed packs carefully to determine if any of your seeds have special needs.
3. Plant the seeds to the depth indicated on the pack. For best results, plant two seeds per container and thin to the healthiest plant.
4. Cover lightly with seed starting mix.
5. Gently compress the seed starting mix over the seeds.
6. Label the containers with the variety and date planted.
7. Keep evenly moist until seedlings appear.

STEP-BY-STEP

Growing a garden is a deeply rewarding experience. Growing it from seeds is even more so. Starting your garden from seed is not only economical, it expands the diversity of cultivars available, avoids importing plant diseases and pests, and offers a deeper connection to your plants.

While growing one's own seedlings may seem a little daunting at first, following a few simple guidelines will increase your chances of success. All you'll need to get started is:

• A great selection of seeds
• A flat surface with plenty of light and a little warmth
• Some containers
• A potting mix
• Organic fertilizer

Starting with high-quality organic seeds is essential. Seeds of Change offers over 400 varieties of certified organic vegetable, herb and flower seeds, selected specifically for organic gardening.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING!

Whether you're planting indoors or out, determining the "frost free" date for your area and studying the information on your seed packs is essential for establishing your planting sequence. If you don't know the average date of the last frost for your area:

• Ask experienced gardeners in your neighborhood
• Contact your local extension service
• Refer to the USDA Zone Chart

PREPARE THE SEED STARTING MIX

Good organic seed starting mixes should be available at your local garden center. If you're planting a lot of seedlings, you might want to make your own simple mix by combining equal parts sphagnum peat moss, perlite and vermiculite. Our research has shown that a mix consisting of three parts peat, two parts vermiculite, one part each of sand and screened compost, and a small amount of kelp powder can reduce the need for additional fertilizing. Some people believe that everything must be sterile, and for peppers, eggplants and surface sown seeds, or if you have problems with damping off, we recommend using a sterile mix. Others like to add a little soil from the garden to lessen the shock of transplanting. Some gardeners use an economical mix of equal parts garden soil and sifted compost. Whichever mix you choose, be sure to thoroughly moisten the mix before filling your containers.

GATHER CONTAINERS

Economical options include:

• Yogurt containers
• The bottoms of milk jugs
• Juice cartons

Whatever containers you choose, be sure they're clean and have holes in the bottom for drainage. Plastic trays or container lids are great for catching the excess water.

SOW YOUR SEEDS

1. Fill planting container(s) with moistened organic seed starting mix.
2. Read your seed packs carefully to determine if any of your seeds have special needs.
3. Plant the seeds to the depth indicated on the pack. For best results, plant two seeds per container and thin to the healthiest plant.
4. Cover lightly with seed starting mix.
5. Gently compress the seed starting mix over the seeds.
6. Label the containers with the variety and date planted.
7. Keep evenly moist until seedlings appear.

KEEP THEM MOIST AND WARM

Once sown, keep your seeds evenly moist without drowning them. If you have only a few plants going, a spray-bottle will work. Eventually, however, you'll want a special watering can or hose nozzle to provide a fine spray.

For surface-sown seeds, you may want to cover your flats or containers with glass or clear plastic to retain moisture and allow light to penetrate. Be careful not to "bake" the seeds in direct sunlight. Once your seedlings emerge, allow the surface of the soil to dry out between watering. Over-watering can lead to problems such as damping off.

Most seeds need a soil temperature of at least 65 degrees Fahrenheit (18 Celsius) to germinate successfully. Again, your packs will have specific information. If you find it difficult or impractical to keep the whole area warm, you may want to consider a Seedling Heat Mat.

PLANTS NEED LIGHT

After your seedlings emerge, it's crucial that they get enough light. In most cases, a sunny window will do, but you'll need to rotate your flats every day, as your seedlings will continuously lean towards the sun. Generally, if your plants look like they are getting 'leggy', or too tall for their size, this means they are not getting enough light. If you don't

have enough sunny window space you may need to add supplemental lighting. Hang your light 6–12 inches from the tops of the plants.

FEED YOUR SEEDLINGS

Your seed starting mix, along with the seeds themselves, should provide ample nutrition in the beginning. However, once the plants develop their second set of leaves, you may wish to give them a diluted weekly dose of a high-potassium, organic liquid fertilizer like fish emulsion and kelp. Be sure not to over-fertilize!

HARDENING OFF

As your seedlings mature, you'll need to get them used to the idea of being outdoors and subject to the sun, wind, and cool nights of the garden environment. About two weeks before transplanting time, set them outside in a protected area for an hour or two at first, then gradually increase their exposure until transplanting day. Be careful not to overdo it, and never leave them out when it frosts!

Using a cold frame or cloche is a great solution as it can be opened and closed as the weather dictates. Follow these few simple rules, and before you know it, you'll have more healthy seedlings than you'll know what to do with (much to the delight of your gardening friends!). For more information on seed starting see our article on Direct Seeding and Transplanting. Good luck!

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