

## Starting\_Seedlings\_2004.txt

Starting from seed is not only economical, it expands the diversity of cultivars available, and offers a deeper connection to the plants we grow.

While growing one's own seedlings may seem a little daunting at first, following a few simple guidelines can 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 good seeds is key. Seeds of Change offers almost 600 varieties of certified organic flower, vegetable and herb seeds, all of which have been developed and 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 other gardeners in your neighborhood

Contact your local extension service

Check out our GardenCycle Planner.

#### Prepare the Potting Mix

Good potting blends should be available at your local garden center. If you're planting a lot of seedlings, you can make your own mix by combining equal parts sphagnum peat moss\*, perlite and vermiculite. Our Research Farm makes a custom mix that consists of three parts peat, two parts vermiculite, one part each of sand and screened compost, and a small amount of kelp powder. Adding mature compost and kelp will reduce the need for additional fertilizing.

Some people believe that everything must be sterile; others like to add a little soil from the garden to lessen the shock of transplanting. "The Sustainable Vegetable Garden" suggests an economical and fully organic mix of equal parts garden soil and sifted compost. Whichever you choose, be sure to thoroughly moisten the mix before filling your containers.

\*A note about peat moss: We are aware that peat is not a sustainably harvested material. After much research, we now offer GrowCair, a renewable, coconut based growing medium as a ecological peat alternative.

#### Gather Containers

Our website and catalog offer a diverse selection of containers, like the Pot Maker, which recycles old newspapers into ideal starter pots, as well as Eco-flats, which are made from recycled cardboard. Economical alternatives include:

Yogurt containers

The bottoms of milk jugs

Juice cartons

Or you can make wooden flats 14"x 23"x 3" deep to hold the most seedlings without getting too heavy. Whatever containers you use, 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

Read your seed packs carefully to determine if any of your seeds have special needs.

Plant the seeds to the depth indicated on the pack.

Cover lightly with soil.

Gently compress the soil over the seeds.  
For best results, plant two seeds per container and thin to the strongest plant. Remember to mark the containers with the variety and date planted. Our Wooden Plant Markers serve as an attractive and biodegradable alternative to plastic.

Keep Them Moist and Warm

Once sown, keep your seeds evenly moist without drowning them. If

you only have a few plants going, a spray-bottle will work. Eventually, however, you'll need a special watering can or Fog 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 waterings. Over-watering can lead to problems such as damping off.

Most seeds need a soil temperature of at least 65 degrees Fahrenheit (18 Celsius). 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. If the temperature in your propagation area varies too much, look into purchasing a Thermostat for your 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. Inexpensive four foot fluorescent "shoplights," are available at most hardware stores. It is best to retrofit them with full spectrum bulbs and to hang them around a foot from the tops of the plants.

#### Feed Your Seedlings

Your potting mix, along with the seeds themselves, will provide ample nutrition in the beginning. However, once the plants develop their second set of leaves, you may wish to give them a mild, weekly

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dose of a high potassium, organic liquid fertilizer. Our EarthJuice Grow is excellent for this purpose. 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. 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. Our Deluxe Cold Frame even has an optional Automatic Vent Opener. In our greenhouses, before we set our plants outside, we occasionally run our hands over them or use a fan to jostle them in order to stimulate healthy stem development.

Follow these simple rules, and before you know it, you'll have more healthy seedlings than you'll know what to do with. For more information on seed starting see our article on Direct Seeding and Transplanting.

Good luck!

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