Seed Starting in 12 Easy Steps

Spring is fast approaching and with it comes the season for seed starting. Growing your own plants from seed is easy, rewarding and economical. It is also a great way to take advantage of the diverse selection of seeds that are available through mail order catalogues and in seed racks that are not often found as transplants at your local garden center.

1) Plant fresh seed at the right time – It is important to sow seed that is fresh to ensure a high germination rate. Before planting, organize your seed packets by the calendar, allowing adequate time for seedlings to reach a good size before transplanting outdoors. The majority of flowering annuals will need from six to 12 weeks of growth, while most vegetables require between three to 12 weeks.

2) Start with a soil ideal for seeds – Most garden plants will be happiest if started in a soil-less mix composed of peat moss, perlite, vermiculite and nutrients, such as Pro-Mix. These potting mixes are lightweight with excellent drainage and water retention. Be sure to thoroughly moisten the media before filling your pots or cell packs to avoid dry spots and uneven wetting.

3) Plant seeds in clean containers – I like to plant my seeds in plastic cell packs, which are then placed in seed trays, as it allows for an efficient use of space. Yet, almost any type of container may be used to start seeds – clean yogurt containers, egg cartons, milk cartons, etc. If re-using old plastic or clay containers, clean them first with warm soapy water. Rinse well!

4) Provide ample light – Lack of adequate light is perhaps the biggest challenge when growing plants indoors. If you don't have a sunny window, use full spectrum fluorescent lights. These fixtures should be turned on for about 16 hours a day and may be hooked up to an inexpensive timer. Continually adjust the lights so that they are about three-inches above the foliage.

5) Plant seeds at the right depth – As a general rule, seeds should be planted at a depth of one to two times their diameter. Refer to the seed pack for specifications, but if the seeds are extremely tiny such as those of foxglove, do not bury them. Simply sprinkle them over the surface of the soil and mist with water to encourage good soil-seed contact. Finally, label the flat to avoid confusion.

6) Humidity – Once planted, a plastic dome or a sheet of plastic wrap should be placed over the seed tray to prevent moisture from

evaporating and to maintain the humidity at an acceptable level for germination. When the seedlings emerge, remove the cover to allow air to circulate.

7) Water from below – It is important to keep the soil thoroughly moist, but not soaking wet. If using cell packs and trays, irrigate from the bottom with room temperature water to avoid crushing the delicate seedlings.

8) Maintain a warm temperature – Most annual, perennial and vegetable seeds will germinate best at standard room temperature. There are some types of plants that prefer cooler or warmer temperatures, but such specific instructions should be listed on the seed packet.

9) Provide good air circulation – Adequate air circulation can be a problem inside a house closed up for the winter, but an oscillating fan set on low will provide plenty of air circulation and help prevent fungal problems.

10) Feed your plants – An application of water-soluble fertilizer at ½ the recommended rate every week will ensure sufficient nutrition.

11) Harden off properly – Prepare your seedlings for the real world about a week before transplanting by gradually acclimating them to outdoor conditions. Begin by putting them outside for a few hours on a warm day in a shady spot. Bring them indoors again at night. Over the next few days gradually give them a bit more sunlight and leave them outside longer. By the end of the week, they should be ready to be planted in the garden.

12) Congratulate yourself – It is always great to be able to say, 'I grew it myself' to friends and neighbours admiring your gorgeous garden!

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