Home Garden Seed Association

how nature grows

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Seed Starting: As Easy as 1 • 2 • 3

If you've never grown anything from seed before, you might be surprised at how easy it is to have a beautiful, productive summer garden starting with a few packs of seed in spring.

1. Use quality seed.
You may be tempted to use old seed, but think first. Was it kept in someone's garage? Is it more than two years old? If in doubt, buy new seed from a trusted seed seller.

2. Maximize light.
Whether natural or artificial, adequate light is necessary for good seedling growth.

3. Don't start your indoor seedlings too soon.
The earlier in the season you start your seeds, the more likely it is that your seedlings will be weak and spindly. Determine your seed starting date by reading the seed packet to see when it is safe to plant seedlings outdoors. For tomatoes this is generally when nights are above 50 degrees. Count back a month to 6 weeks.
NOTE: Just because a tomato plant *can* go outside immediately after danger of frost, there's no law saying it *must*.

Carrots, lettuce, flowers, tomatoes, herbs, and many other garden favorites are easily started from seed.

What seeds should I start indoors in containers?

Not every type of seed needs to be started indoors. In fact, many are best sown directly in the garden soil. In some regions it makes sense to start seeds of spring greens indoors to get an early crop, and then sow more of the same greens outdoors to extend the growing season.

Seeds to Start Indoors

- Tomatoes
- Peppers
- Eggplants
- Broccoli
- Cabbage
- Cauliflower
- Brussels Sprouts
- Perennial flowers
- Herbs of many types
- Onions

Start in Containers *or* Sow in the Garden

- Lettuce, plus other salad greens
- Kale
- Basil
- Chard
- Cucumbers
- Melons
- Nasturtiums
- Parsley
- Spinach
- Squash
- Sunflowers
- Zinnias

Sow Directly in the Garden

- Carrots
- Beans
- Beets
- Corn
- Peas
- Radishes
- Arugula
- Parsnips
- Spring Onions
- Turnips
- Cilantro
- Dill

Tip: First plan your garden; then order your seeds. Sometimes the tastiest vegetable varieties, most interesting herbs, and old-fashioned flowers such as larkspur, four o'clock, and love-lies-bleeding are available *only* from seed.

Where should I put my indoor seedlings?

A south or west-facing window will provide adequate light, assuming you wait until the longer days of April to begin planting. If you have a sun porch, even better, but keep an eye on the weather; you'll need to provide heat on frosty nights. If natural light is not available you can purchase lights. Cool white fluorescent tubes will do the job, and are much more economical than full spectrum grow lights. Place them two to four inches above your seedlings, and keep them on 16-18 hours a day.

Tip: If you are starting seeds in a cool space, purchasing a heat mat to place under your seedling trays will speed germination. Once seeds sprout, remove the tray from the mat.

A sunny window may provide enough light, or you may need to purchase lights.

A Brief How-To

Supplies

For indoor seed starting, get a good soilless mix and some containers. These can be recycled plastic containers from the grocery store, half-gallon milk containers sliced lengthwise, purchased trays and cell inserts, biodegradable pots, or anything that is at least 2 inches in depth. Be sure to add drainage holes if your container has none.

Planting Indoors

Moisten the soil mix to the consistency of a wrung out sponge before planting seeds. A rule of thumb when it comes to starting tomatoes indoors in cell packs: plant two to three seeds in a cell and thin to one when the seedlings grow their first set of true leaves. This goes for all plants that you are starting from seed, including peppers, eggplants, squash, annual flowers, and even greens.

Transplanting

If you sow rows of seeds in flats or recycled containers, drop them no closer than 1/2 inch apart. Transplant seedlings into individual cells or pots when they have one or two sets of true leaves.

Seedling Health

Seedlings thrive when provided with plenty of light and enough water to keep the soil moist but not wet. Begin feeding them with a half-strength liquid fertilizer when they have at least two sets of leaves. If possible, bring them outdoors on warm sunny spring days.

If Planting Directly Outdoors

Read the packets of root vegetables, greens, beans, and other plants for seedling spacing. Gardeners, especially beginning gardeners, tend to sow seeds too closely. Try to scatter seeds of greens and root vegetables about an inch apart when sowing directly in the garden, otherwise plants will be overly crowded, and will not thrive.

Tip: Thinning is critical to garden success! With the exception of baby greens, all seedlings should be thinned according to packet instructions.

Seeds can be germinated in recycled containers and then transplanted into individual cells. Some plants—beans are a good example—don't need to be started indoors. Sow them directly into the soil.

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