

Seed Starting for the Spring Vegetable Garden

A brief guide from smallgardennews.com

What Do I Need to Get Started?

1. Seeds
2. Planting medium
3. Moisture, temperature, light, “greenhouse lid”
4. Planting depth information
5. Time

What Seeds Can I Start Now?

Plants that are good to start ahead of time are typically those that have a long time-to-maturity, like tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants. Other seeds to start ahead indoors include (potentially) greens of all kinds and herbs.

Crops that can be transplanted successfully into the garden, but are more typically seeded directly into the garden include green beans, squash, cucumbers, peas, and melons.

In general, the root crops (carrots, beets, turnips, parsnips, rutabagas) are less easy to transplant successfully. The mature roots tend to grow into odd shapes that are hard to clean to use in the kitchen.

Will Any Potting Mix Work?

Regular potting mix is not the best choice. Such mixes generally are fairly coarse, so that smaller seeds wash down too deep into the mix and can't break through to the surface after germination, and they often have too much fertilizer for seedlings, which are very sensitive to the fertilizer salts.

Instead, look for a seedling starter mix. Such a mix will be very finely textured, will be essentially fertilizer-free, and may be sterile (or close enough) so that the damping-off fungus that sometimes attacks seedlings is less likely to strike.

Moisture, Temperature, Light, Greenhouse Lid?

Moisture – Seeds need to be kept evenly moist, but not soggy, for best results. If seeds are too wet, they tend to rot rather than germinate. If seeds are too dry, they will just wait around until there's enough water for them to grow.

Temperature – The preferred temperature range for germination of many vegetable garden seeds is from about 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. When the temperature is too cool, germination will be slow. When the temperature is too warm, germination can be

slow, and new seedlings that do emerge may gain a lot of height quickly, becoming spindly and weak.

Light – As soon as germination has occurred and a seedling has pushed its seed leaves up above the soil level, a strong light source needs to be provided. A very sunny window is not enough; 14-16 hours of light each day is better. A fluorescent light kept a couple of inches above the plants can provide the needed light.

Greenhouse Lid – Maintaining an even moisture level is made easier if the flat or pot containing newly planted seeds is covered to prevent the growing medium from drying out. If possible, the lid can stay on until the seedlings have developed a couple of true leaves. If the seedling tray is in a very sunny window, the greenhouse lid may allow too much heat to build up inside the container. Check your flat to make sure the plant babies don't end up being cooked under the lid!

When Should I Start Seeds Indoors? (Timing)

Count back from date of last expected frost in spring or forward to the first frost in fall. As an example, a seed that should be started 6-8 weeks before the first frost, which has been around April 10 in our area, should be started between February 11th & 25th.

You might want to adjust the time for temperature differences and to allow for succession planting. If seeds are being started in a cooler room, they are likely to take longer to germinate and may need an additional week. If some tomato plants are for a later crop, then some seeds may need to be started a full month or more after the first batch.

Bumping Up

Plants will need to be moved out of their seed-starting containers into larger containers that contain a regular potting mix. Move the little plants after they have developed their first set of true leaves. These are the second set of leaves to appear on the seedlings, and they may be different in shape than the seed leaves. When transferring seedlings to new pots, handle them by the root ball or by the leaves. Do not hold the stems.

Hardening Off

Before planting your little plants in the garden, they need to be "toughened up" a bit. The fluorescent lights the plants have been growing under are not nearly as bright as the sun; your watering is not like a pounding rain; and the air in your home does not move (usually) at 20-or-more miles an hour. To allow your plant babies to adjust, move them into a location outside that offers filtered sunlight for a couple of hours. The next day, leave them a little longer in that filtered-sun location. Leave them a little longer every day for 6-10 days before planting them in the garden. This will dramatically improve their survival rate.

What does Amy do?

I have used pre-fab Jiffy Pellet sets. I have used flats/trays made from wood and flats/trays made from plastic. I have used purchased, sterile, seed-starting mixes, and I have used homemade mixes of compost and peat moss. My lights are not official "grow lights", just inexpensive fluorescent tubes. The good news is that, as long as I have done everything else right, with moisture, light, temperature, and planting times, these different materials have all worked to give me little plants for the garden. Seeds are amazing! I hope that this guide helps you start some seeds, too.