

Starting seeds indoors

LAST MONTH WE TALKED ABOUT BUYING SEEDS. Now it's almost March, time to think about starting a few indoors to give you a head start on the season. Seeds started indoors require the same three basic conditions as those started outside – soil, light and water. But because they're in an artificial environment there are a few things you need to keep in mind.

First, avoid the fungus! One of the banes of seed growing is a fungus known as damping-off disease. The spores of this fungus are ever present in soil and the conditions of indoor gardening are perfect for it. To avoid this scourge use a sterile soil or soil-less mix – usually a combination of vermiculite and peat moss. When buying a seed-starting medium, make sure it has been sterilized! This should be clearly indicated on the packaging. After it has been thoroughly moistened, the medium can be placed in *clean* flats, peat pots, dixie cups, egg cartons, yogurt containers, etc. The size of the container will depend on what type of plant you're growing.

Seedlings need a *lot* of light or they will grow tall and spindly or "leggy." Even if you have a window that receives full sun, you might need to supplement it with artificial light. If you are using only artificial light, you'll need a great deal of it. Use bulbs that are specifically made for growing plants, place them just a foot or so above your seedlings. Be sure to raise them as the plants grow! You'll want to keep these lights on for 14 hours a day. Fluorescent tubes are ideal because they don't produce as much heat, which can quickly dry out your seedlings.

The third ingredient is water, and this is the one that will require the most attention. You want to keep the growth medium moist, but not let it become wet or soggy. It is best to water from below, allowing the medium to soak up the water like a sponge. To promote germination, many gardeners cover the flats or pots with plastic wrap. This keeps the planting medium both warm and moist, but must be removed as soon as the seeds sprout. Otherwise, you risk suffocating your young seedlings. At this point you will need to keep an eye on things to maintain the proper moisture. If you have a totally artificial setup you will probably be able to predict how often you'll need to water. If you're using a sunny window sill, you'll need to watch more closely. Placing the containers on a raised bed of gravel spread across the bottom of a large pan with a small amount of water can help to prevent your seedlings from drying out. Make sure the water level is below that of the gravel so that the plant containers rest on the gravel and *not* on the water.

If your seedlings outgrow your flats or small pots you might try thinning them and transplanting the largest to bigger containers, but for the most part you want to plant them outside just as they become large enough to survive transplanting – that usually takes about eight weeks. Check the seed packet or the catalog, many include information for starting seeds indoors. As a rule of thumb, if you're aiming to plant in late May, you shouldn't start most seeds before mid-March., You may want to provide your seedlings a little food in the form of a weak, water-soluble fertilizer. And *most important*, for a week or two before you plant them out, put your seedlings outside in a sheltered, shady spot to harden off. But be sure to bring them in if there's frost in the forecast, and beware of cold winds that can be fatal to tender seedlings.