

WHEN TO START SEEDS

IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR when many of us have already received the seeds we ordered from our favourite catalogues and we can hardly wait to get started. The question is: when is the right time to start? The instructions on the seed packet are sometimes helpful, but often not, so here are some tips gathered from various sources that may help you produce a bumper crop of healthy seedlings this Spring.

Seed starting instructions often refer to the “frost-free date”. According to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture the frost-free date in our region is May 16. But hold on a minute, “frost-free” doesn't mean what you think. It actually means there is only a 50-50 chance of frost! So don't rush to put your little tender seedlings in the ground on the 16th. By all means put them outside in a sheltered spot to harden off, but listen to the weather reports and be prepared to bring them in at night.

The consensus among the experts is that to be on the safe side warm-season plants should be transplanted outside – after hardening-off – two to three weeks after the frost-free date. Flowers and vegetables that are not frost-tolerant are classified as warm-season plants, and those are the ones we typically grow from seed... tomatoes, peppers, petunias, marigolds, and so on. So forget that old rule about Victoria Day weekend, and wait until the end of the month.

Another handy rule of thumb is that transplants should be at least four to six inches tall. Most of the plants we grow need about six weeks growing time to reach this height. So to determine when to start your seeds, check on the packet to see how long they need to germinate, and add six weeks. Now back up that number of days from the date you plan to transplant your seedlings into the garden. For example, if your seeds need 10 days to germinate, you're looking at a total of 52 days. For a May 31 transplant date that means you need to start your seedlings around April 10.

Seedlings that are started too early tend to get “leggy” and weak, and may not survive when you transplant them. To help plants grow compact and strong, grow them at cooler temperatures, between 16 and 19 degrees, and try shaking them for a few seconds several times each day. The shaking causes a similar reaction in the plant that wind does outside and makes plants shorter, bushier, and stronger. At least, that's what the experts say!