

Haddam Garden Club

February 2017 Garden Blog Article

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Hope: Seed Starting Primer

As I write this, there is a foot of snow on the ground and winter isn't even half over. I have been pouring over the seed catalogs and once again, have this vision of all of these wonderful plants and flowers growing in my gardens. In this vision, there are no weeds. The plants are lush and full, covered with beautiful flowers and vegetables. Bees, hummingbirds and butterflies flit about sipping the glorious nectar and I breathe in the heavenly scents. There are no brown leaves, spots or other imperfections. I guess my vision is more like a dream. It actually looks like a plant food ad.

Start by buying good quality seed in appropriate quantities. The older the seed gets, the poorer the germination rate. Read the directions on the seed pack and figure back from the date of the last frost. UCONN says May 15 which will be when the soil temp, air temp and light conditions are right. So, read the directions. There isn't much point in trying to rush it. Starting later is better than starting earlier. Count backwards from 5/15 to determine when you should start the seeds according to the directions.

Note the germination time for each pack of seed you want to start

You CAN spend a lot of money starting seeds indoors BUT you don't have to.

MATERIALS

Individual or larger containers for multiple seeds. You can buy new cell packs that come with a tray and a clear plastic dome lid or use things you have around the house. Paper cups, recycled yogurt containers, the cell-packs your starts came in last year, cut off milk jugs are all fine..... They just need to be 2-3" deep with drainage holes. Clean and sanitize previously used containers in a 10% bleach solution before use and rinse well.

Trays to hold the cells and water.

Plastic wrap or the plastic dome to cover the seeds until germination.

Strong light source. A very sunny window will do or you can rig up suspended fluorescent lights to hang an inch or so above the seedlings. They do not need to be "grow" lights but certainly use them if you have them.

Source of heat. Ideal germination temp for most veggies is between 70 and 90 degrees. (I don't know about you but there isn't any place in MY house even close to this warm.). Above (not on) a radiator or woodstove works. Light isn't necessary until the seeds come up. Alternatively, you can purchase heat mats for about \$40 to place under the trays.

Soil-less potting mix. Garden soil doesn't work. If you have bought organic seeds, you might as well get organic seed starting mix too. If you can find a mix with coir (a by-product of the coconut industry) instead of peat, it is environmentally better as peat bogs grow VERY slowly.

PROCESS

1. Moisten potting mix by putting it in a bucket and adding water. Mix well until evenly moist and JUST damp.

2. Fill the containers loosely with the mix, level with the top. A yard stick swept over works well. Do not pack down.

The plants need room to grow, above and below the soil. If you plant several seeds in a cell, you could will find yourself thinning or transplanting to give them the room they need.

3. You can plant 1 or more seeds per cell, depending on the cell size. Plant larger seeds (melon, cucumbers, zinnias) individually or double to thin later. Small seeds can be seeded in groups and later transplanted or thinned. I use the eraser end of a pencil to poke the hole for the seed(s). Put cells on the tray. Group those with similar germination times together. Label what you have done or at least draw yourself a diagram.

4. Some seeds need to be covered, some not (again, the directions). I tried Melissa Gibson's idea of putting 1 piece of vermiculite over the seed which worked for me.

5. Water lightly with warm water. A spray bottle works well for this.

Cover the trays with plastic wrap or the clear plastic dome and put in the warm place.

Watch.

When you have a true set of leaves, you can begin feeding them with a weak solution of plant food or compost tea. Water sparingly. Overwatering can cause a whole hose of problems from fungus to insects, all of which will kill your babies. Run your hand over the tops after they are a few inches tall. It strengthens the stems.

If you have problems, the Middlesex County Cooperative Extension should be able to help you.

Keep records to refer to next year.