

Haddam Garden Club

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Starting Seeds Indoors

Hopefully you have ordered the seeds that strike your fancy by now. If not, it's time to get going.

Now, I'm not one who starts by reading the directions before I do much of anything. I do it the way I think it should be done. Only when my way fails do I read the directions. Let me save you some heartache and time—read the directions. They tell you *when* to start the seeds, *if* they should be covered and *how deep*, how many days to germination and other handy tidbits that matter.

UCONN says we should be frost-free after May 15. Count backwards from this date to know when to start the seeds

MATERIALS:

Containers You can buy new cell packs that come with a tray and a clear plastic dome lid or use things you probably have at home. Paper cups, recycled yogurt containers, the cell-packs your starts came in last year--are all fine. The plastic containers seedlings come in that don't have dividers are great for the little seeds like lettuce as are the plastic clam-shell packs like strawberries come in. They just need to be 2-3" deep with drainage holes. You can also plant directly in the planters you will eventually be putting outside. Clean and sanitize previously used containers in a 10% bleach solution and rinse well.

Trays to hold the cells and water.

Plastic wrap or the plastic dome that comes with the new flat to cover the seeds until germination.

Source of heat. Ideal germination temp for most veggies is between 70 and 90 degrees. Don't be tempted to set them on top of a radiator or woodstove. Heat mats to place under the flats are about \$40 each. You only need this for germination.

Strong light source. A very sunny window will do or you can suspend 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.

Soil-less potting mix. Garden soil doesn't work

PROCESS:

- Moisten potting mix by putting it in a bucket and adding water. Mix well until evenly moist and JUST damp—when you can squeeze a fistful and it holds together, no wetter.
- Fill the containers loosely with the mix and place in the tray. Level the top by sweeping a yardstick over the top. Do not pack down.
- Planting: Group those seeds with similar germination times together on the trays. Big seeds should be 1 per cell whereas small ones can be grouped in a container and thinned later. Be sure the seeds are planted at the proper depth. Some seeds need to be covered, some not. Your seed packet will give you this information. .
- Water lightly with warm water. A spray bottle works well for this.
- Cover the trays with plastic wrap or the clear plastic dome the flats come with and put in the warm place.
- Water sparingly. Overwatering can cause a whole host of problems from fungus to disease, which can kill your seedlings.

Check the soil periodically and water when dry. Try to water the tray evenly. Watering from underneath is a good method too. The plants take up the water when they need it.

As the plants start to grow, they will develop 2 leaves. Later, a third and fourth will come. These are “true” leaves. At this point, you can begin adding a weak solution of plant food or compost tea to when you water.

Be sure the little plants have enough room above and below the soil. Spread them out or snip some plants off with little scissors to achieve this. Don't try to pull them out by the roots. This will disrupt the plant you want to save, too. You will need to transplant to larger containers if the plants outgrow their original ones.

About 7-10 days before you intend to plant them in the ground, you will need to begin the “hardening off” process. The first day, set them outside in a sheltered shady spot. Bring them back in after a few hours. Increase the exposure each day, adding some sun, eventually leaving them out overnight. Protect them from cool temperatures, strong wind, strong rain and very strong sun. Then after May 15, you can put the seedlings in the garden.

Label everything and keep records. Don't be discouraged if you don't have complete success the first time. You can replant after sanitizing or purchase the plants from the garden center.

Gardening is a journey and you will become more skilled with each turn.