



Redding Garden Club

Garden Tips

Indoor Seed Starting

By Colleen Miklinevich

*“The very act of planting a seed in the earth has in it to me something beautiful. I always do it with a joy that is largely mixed with awe.” —Celia Thaxter, *An Island Garden* 1894*

I have enjoyed starting plants for my kitchen garden for many years. While it's easy to buy transplants in the spring, you'll find that there are advantages to growing your own. Seed catalogs offer a more varied and less costly way of having a cutting garden and vegetables for your table. Johnny's (Johnnyseeds.com) offers expert horticultural instruction. Pinetree Garden Seeds (superseeds.com) caters to the home gardener, offering smaller size seed packets. Since they're located in Maine, I figure if they can grow it, so can I. I also like John Scheepers (kitchengardenseeds.com) located in Bantam, CT.

Buy seeds that are easy to grow. Some flower seeds are very tiny and take forever to get started—avoid these. Don't scorn old-fashioned flowers like Marigolds, Zinnias, China Asters and Rudbeckia. They are all easy to grow for beautiful color.

Let's begin with dirt. You can buy dirt plugs that are ready for seeds, but I recommend peat pots. They are biodegradable and can be added to your soil when you're done with them. Germination mix is preferable to potting soil, but is more expensive. Always wet your soil prior to planting seed, not drenched, just moist. Sanitation is important, so if you are re-using old plastic pots, wash them well, and rinse with a Clorox/water mixture. Plant seeds at the depth recommended on the packet.

Seeds appreciate gentle bottom heat. A heating pad at about 80 degrees or a warming cable will speed germination and prevent rot. If possible, keep flats covered to hold in moisture until germination. Plants need strong light to flourish, but you don't need fancy grow-lights. I use shop lights with new fluorescent bulbs, hung by chains to a level just above the plants. Fluorescent bulbs lose their light intensity after a growing season, so they do need to be replaced each year for strong, stocky plants. I put mine on a timer, set for 16 hours on, 8 hours off. The old window sill method will just get you leggy, spindly, unhealthy plants.

Watering has to be done very gently until germination. Use of a spray bottle or immersion in a water bath is recommended to make sure you don't dislodge seeds. Be careful not to over-water, or your plants will succumb to damping-off disease.

Most seedlings do not need fertilizer until they have several sets of true leaves. I like fish emulsion fertilizer for seedlings; it's smelly but really is the best. I find that using the “weekly weakly” rule has worked well.

Do not allow your young charges to become pot-bound. Transplant to a larger pot to avoid stress. Pay attention to the number of weeks required until planting out when you start the seed. Transplants dislike being chilled, so heed the last frost date, and cover them on chilly nights.

Some fast growing seeds don't need the indoor treatment. Peas and beans are some, as well as some plants that just won't tolerate being transplanted.

I hope that some of you will try my suggestions, and have a wonderful time as you watch your garden plants sprout and thrive. It really can be a lot of fun in an otherwise bleak time of year.