



# SEED STARTING TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

## Place Sure Bets

Some plants lend themselves to home germination better than others. Surefire vegetables include basil, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, chives, leeks, lettuce, onions, peppers, and tomatoes. Some reliable annual flowers are Alyssum, cosmos, marigolds, and zinnias. Perennials include Shasta daisies, columbines, and hollyhocks.

## Gather containers

Reuse last year's nursery flats if you have some around. Otherwise, any container 2 or 3 inches deep will do. Punch holes for drainage into the bottom of containers and set them into trays. Protect against plant disease by thoroughly cleaning all used containers: Wash them in hot, soapy water, and rinse with a dilute solution of household bleach and water. If you want a less-irritating substitute for the bleach, use distilled white vinegar.

## Pick the right growing medium

You can buy bags of seed-starter mix or you can make your own by blending equal parts of perlite, vermiculite, and peat. Add 1/4 teaspoon of lime to each gallon of mix to neutralize the acidity of the peat. You'll eventually want to replot most of your seedlings into larger containers before setting them into the garden. But lettuce, melons, and cucumbers are finicky about being transplanted and should go directly from the original containers into the garden. When starting these fussier plants, always add two parts well-aged, screened compost to your mix to give them a healthy beginning.

## Sow carefully

Moisten your medium in the containers before sowing the seeds. Next, drop seeds onto the surface of the mix, spacing them as evenly as possible. Cover the seeds to a depth about three times the thickness of the seeds. Some seeds, such as ageratum, Alyssum, impatiens, petunias, and snapdragons, should not be covered at all because they need light in order to germinate.

## Top it off

Lightly sprinkle milled sphagnum moss, a natural fungicide, over everything to protect against damping-off, a fungal disease that rots seeds and seedlings. In the case of seeds that need light to germinate, sprinkle the moss first and then drop the seeds onto the moss.

## Keep seeds cozy

Cover the flats with plastic wrap or glass to keep the environment humid and place them near a heat vent or on a heat mat made especially for seed starting. Most seeds germinate well at about 70 degrees F.

## Keep them damp

Mist with a spray bottle or set the trays into water so the mix wicks up the moisture from below.



## Lighten up

At the first signs of sprouting, uncover and move the containers to a bright spot—a sunny window, a greenhouse, or beneath a couple of ordinary fluorescent shop lights (4-footers with two 40-watt bulbs). The lights are worthwhile, especially if you live in the North. They provide a steady source of high-intensity light. Short days restrict window light, and your seedlings need 12 to 16 hours of light a day. Suspend the lights just 2 inches above the plants and gradually raise them as the seedlings mature. If plants have to stretch or lean toward the light, they can become weak and spindly. To turn the lights on and off at the same time each day, hook them up to an electric timer.

## Cool down

Seedlings don't have to stay as warm as germinating seeds. Move them away from radiators and air vents, or off the heating mat, as soon they have germinated.

## Feed them

If you're using a soilless mix without compost, begin to fertilize your seedlings as soon as they get their first true leaves. (These leaves emerge after the little, round cotyledon leaves.) Water with a half-strength solution of liquid fish/seaweed fertilizer every week or two. Use either a spray bottle or add the fertilizer to the water you set the trays in if you're using the wick-up method described above.

## Give them room

If the seedlings outgrow their containers or crowd one another, repot them into larger containers filled with a mix that includes compost. Extract the seedlings with a narrow fork or flat stick, and handle by their leaves and roots to avoid damaging the fragile stems. Tuck the seedlings gently into the new pots, and water them to settle the roots.

## Pet them

Lightly ruffling seedlings once or twice a day with your hand or a piece of cardboard helps them to grow stocky and strong. Or, set up a small fan to gently, continuously blow on your seedlings.

## Toughen them up

About 1 week before the plants are to go outside, start acclimating them to the harsh conditions of the big world. Gardeners call this hardening off. On a warm spring day move the containers to a shaded, protected place, such as a porch, for a few hours. Each day—unless the weather is horrible—gradually increase the plants exposure to sun and breeze. At the end of the week leave them out overnight; then transplant them into the garden.