

# Seed Starting at Home

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It's the middle of winter, but we gardeners are itching to get digging. It's easy to get excited when all the spring seed catalogs start arriving! But how practical is growing from seed vs. buying starts? It depends on how much time and space you want to dedicate. Growing from seed can save lots of money in the long run, but it requires a bit more work.

Some plants are easier to grow than others from seed. Some take a long time to germinate, or need to be grown indoors, under lights, until outside temps are warm enough to transplant. Seed packets will tell you if a seed must be started indoors or if it prefers to be direct-seeded into the garden. The instructions will often tell you to start seeds a certain number of weeks before the last frost date (which, for us, is around mid-April). For example, tomatoes and peppers, which take a long time to reach transplant size and require steady, warm temps, are started 6 to 8 weeks before last frost. Alternatively, plants like cucumbers and green beans grow very quickly, but do not like to be transplanted, so they are sown directly into the ground around late May, when the weather is warming up. Just read the seed packets—they'll tell you what the plant wants.

Use potting soil to start seeds (my favorite is Edna's Best brand), in recycled nursery pots or yogurt containers (poke holes in the bottom for drainage). You can buy inexpensive drip trays or seed-starting setups, too. It's a good idea to use seeds that are no more than 2 years old. Plant 5 seeds for every one plant you desire. When the seedlings are all germinated, carefully thin out all but the healthiest-looking start. Once the plants have two sets of leaves, fertilize with an organic liquid fertilizer (such as Dr. Earth or fish emulsion), diluted to half-strength, once a week.

To start seeds inside, you *must* have a light source. Window light is not sufficient. I use simple 4 foot shop light fixtures with 2 fluorescent tubes—one warm-spectrum light (it may say "kitchen & bath"), and one cool-spectrum ("office"). Or buy tubes that are specifically listed for plants. Hang the lights over a shelf or table with chains so that you can raise the lights as the plants grow. Unless you are using very high-output lights, keep the light no more than 4" above the plants. The plants should not look leggy or like they are reaching toward the light.

Once the weather is warm enough, start to harden off seedlings. This means *gradually* exposing them to outdoor temperature and light conditions. Put them in a protected, shady spot in the daytime, and bring them back in at night, slowly exposing them to more light, exposure, and cooler evening temps. Depending on the weather, 2 weeks is usually an adequate amount of time for the plants to get used to harsher outdoor conditions, until they are finally ready to transplant.

Growing your own starts is so rewarding. Have fun nurturing those plant babies!