

## A Greener View: New plants require some babying

by *Jeff\_Rugg*

Q: I have some seeds left over from my green peppers and beans from last year's garden. I want to plant them early, so they will be ready as plants, not wait to plant them in the garden. I also want to plant tomatoes and some other plants early. What do I need to do to have them ready on time?

A: One of the reasons it is good to buy garden seeds is the seed packet often has a lot of useful planting information on it. Another reason is that the seeds you collected may have been from a hybrid plant and the new plants may not produce the same high-quality produce. It is fun to try, and they may turn out fine. Using collected seeds is the only way to get some of the old heirloom vegetable varieties.

The timing of this project is very important. There are some garden plants that can survive a frost or cold weather, and some that are warm weather only. In general, they all would get planted as a seed indoors about eight weeks before the date you would plant them outdoors.

You will need to know the date when your area gets its average final spring frost and plan to set out the warm-weather plants that you mentioned in your question a few weeks after that date. Cool-season plants like broccoli, lettuce and peas can get planted outside several weeks before the last frost date. In southern regions that don't get a frost and where gardening only slows down instead of stopping, you can plant cool-season crops every few weeks all winter long for fresh new harvests until the weather is too hot.

Once you have decided on when to plant the seeds, you need to decide what to plant them in. They can go into trays of sterile planting soil, into their own individual peat moss pots or into reusable plastic or clay pots.

Trays are convenient when the plants are small because many will fit into a small place. As they get bigger, only the more robust plants will get transplanted into larger pots. Transplanting takes work; some plants may die during the process. Always gently loosen the soil around the roots with a small pointed stick or pencil. Pick up tiny plants by a leaf, never the stem. If there is damage to a leaf, the plant will survive, but if the stem is damaged, the plant will probably die.

Transplanting small plants out of plastic or clay pots will cause some root damage, which results in transplant shock, so I prefer to use small peat moss pots for seedlings. There are two styles. One is a typical pot that you fill with soil. The other is a flat, dehydrated pellet. It expands into a pot with soil when you water it. Either one will allow the plant to be put in the garden without any transplant shock to the roots. The peat moss pot or other types of pots made from paper will become organic matter in the garden soil.

Plant the seeds into the pots at no more than three times the diameter of the seed. Some seeds are so small it is easier to place them on the soil and then just sprinkle a little peat moss on top. Gently press the seeds into the soil. Set the pots into a tray of water, allowing the water to fill no more than halfway up the pot. After an hour, remove the water and, thereafter, just add enough water to the tray to keep the soil damp.

Watering the pots from the top seems to promote damping off, a disease that attacks the seedlings at the soil level; they topple over as though a miniature lumberjack felled them. High humidity and a lack of air movement also help fungus grow.

Don't fertilize the seedlings. Fertilizer tends to build up on top of the soil, where it damages the tiny stem, killing the plant.

Keep the soil warm. In the mid-70s is best for most garden plants. Once the seedlings have a couple of real leaves, the heat can be reduced. There are heating mats that the watering tray can sit on to keep the soil warm without having to heat the whole room.

The first two leaves, called seed leaves, are in fact the two halves of a seed. A good example is a peanut. The two halves that we eat are the seed leaves that nourish the plant until the root is bigger and until the stem has grown real leaves; they then fall off. The little germ part of the peanut that looks like a little Santa Claus face is the part that grows the root and the stem.

A very important but sometimes difficult-to-achieve task is giving the seedlings enough light. A seemingly bright window may not really give them enough light, especially if there is a string of cloudy days. If the seedlings all lean over or grow really long stems between each set of leaves, they are telling you they are starved for light.

A grow light of any kind is best. Second-best is a mix of fluorescent lights. They will need to be placed 3 to 6 inches above the seedlings and moved up as the plants grow taller. The lights should be on for at least 12 to 14 hours a day. A timer is the best way to be sure the seedlings get enough light.

Once the plants have more than two sets of true leaves, the heat can be turned off and the pots left to dry a day or two before watering. However, don't let the plants wilt from too much sunlight.

A week or so before they are going to be planted outdoors, the plants should begin the process of hardening off. Take them outside into a shady location during the day and bring them back in at night.

As you decide how many plants to put into your garden this year, remember that many food pantries accept fresh produce. The Garden Writers Association has a program called Plant a Row for the Hungry. This is a no-red-tape idea of just people helping people. Plant extra vegetables and take the bountiful harvest to your local pantry.

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