



# Starting a garden from seed

Germinating seeds is fun and cost-effective

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Starting your vegetable garden from seeds is a great way to save money on your vegetables for the summer. Best of all, you don't have to wait for warm weather to get your hands dirty.

Any small, clean container will work for starting seeds, but nursery flats are available for a reasonable price and provide consistency. Make sure there are drainage holes in the bottom. If you are reusing containers from the previous season, clean them with diluted bleach or white vinegar. Easy vegetables to germinate include lettuce, onions, peppers, tomatoes, broccoli and chives. Reliable annuals include Alyssum, cosmos, marigolds and zinnias.

Seed-starting potting mixes are composed of perlite, vermiculite, and peat. This composition allows for proper moisture control and minimizes the chance of damping off. Most seedlings will need to be repotted before it's time to put them outside, so be sure to have several larger containers ready to be used.

Moisten the planting medium before sowing seeds. Drop the seeds onto the surface of the medium and space them evenly. Cover the seeds to a depth about three times the thickness of the seeds. Some seeds, including Alyssum, impatiens and snapdragons should not be covered because they require light to germinate. Read instructions on each package of seeds.

Cover flats with a humidome or plastic wrap to keep the environment humid. Place the flat on a heat mat or similar warm surface. Most seeds germinate well at about 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Mist the seeds regularly with a spray bottle. Do not saturate the potting medium with overhead watering as this will disturb the seedlings.

At the first sign of sprouting, remove the humidome and place the flats in a bright spot. T5 or fluorescent lights are a great light source. Seedlings need 12-16 hours of light each day. Suspend the lights about 2 inches above the seedlings and gradually raise them as the seedlings mature. If plants have to stretch to the light, they will be weak and spindly. Use an electric timer to regulate the light cycle.

Seedlings don't need the same warmth as seeds, so move them away from heating pads or vents.

Begin fertilizing seedlings as soon as they get their first true leaves (not the round cotyledon leaf, but the second set that emerge.) Water with a half-strength solution of fish or seaweed fertilizer every

week. Use either a spray bottle or add fertilizer to water that you set the trays in if you're using the wick method.

Repot seedlings as they outgrow their containers or crowding begins. Include compost in the new containers. Tuck the seedlings gently into the new pots, and water them to settle the roots.

Lightly ruffle the seedlings twice a day with your hand to keep them short and strong.

About one week prior to planting the seedlings outdoors, start acclimating them to the harsh conditions of the outdoor world. This is called hardening off. On warm days, move the containers to shaded, protected spot for a few hours. Gradually increase exposure to sun and wind as the weather permits. After one week, leave them out overnight, then transplant into the garden.