

Starting seeds indoors



There's a lot of interest these days in home vegetable and herb gardening as a way to save money. Starting your own herbs, flowers, and vegetables from seed can be a very economical way to produce a number of seedlings. It can give you a sense of pride and accomplishment, and it allows you access to thousands of varieties that aren't normally available as started plants. All it takes is a few items and a little time.

To Get Started You Need

Light: Either a sunny window with a south or west exposure, or full-spectrum fluorescent lights (plant lights).

Containers: Seed flats without holes, and either seed cell-tray inserts, plastic pots, peat pots, or peat pellets. Also a clear plastic humidity cover to keep seeds moist.

"Soil": Actually a soil-less, lightweight seed starting mix, such as JIFFY MIX® or Fafard® Germination Mix. (Not necessary if using peat pellets).

Water: You'll need a spray bottle and a watering can.

Food: Use a good, well-balanced liquid fertilizer, such as a general purpose 20-20-20. For an organic approach, use a fish emulsion or kelp fertilizer.

Seedling Heat Mat: This is helpful if you're starting warm weather seeds (tomatoes, eggplants) in a cool spot like the basement.

Seeds: Choose from hundreds of varieties.

Starting Your Seeds

First fill your pots or cell trays with seed starting mix, and water to make sure it's settled.

Then plant your seeds at the proper depth, which will vary from one type of plant to the next. In general, very tiny seeds will need to be placed on the surface, and need light to sprout. Larger seeds should generally be planted twice as deep as the seed is long. Make sure to read the seed packet for more specific instructions.

Place two or three seeds in each cell or pot to ensure that each gets a healthy seedling.

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Growing the Seedlings

Once you see new growth, remove the cover so the young plants get fresh air.

Mist the seedlings frequently, and water as needed. Make sure to keep the soil moist to encourage good root development.

After all of the seeds have sprouted, thin out the young plants so each cell or pot only has one healthy seedling left. The best way to do this is to snip off the weaker plants with a pair of scissors sterilized with rubbing alcohol.

If you're using artificial lights, keep the tops of the seedlings 2 to 3 inches away from the lights... far enough to prevent the leaves from burning, close enough to keep the seedlings from stretching out.

If you keep your seedlings in a window, turn them $\frac{1}{4}$ turn every day or two to keep the stems straight.

As soon as the second set of leaves appear, start fertilizing your seedlings weekly with a $\frac{1}{4}$ strength fertilizer solution.

Run your hand gently over the seedlings each day. Gentle movement helps to strengthen the stems and prepare them for life outside in the wind and rain.

Hardening Off And Planting Outside

As the weather warms and planting time approaches, start putting your seedlings outside during the day, and then taking them back inside at night. Start off by placing them in a shady, protected spot for a few hours. Gradually place them in more sun each day.

After one week, they should be ready to plant outside. Enjoy!

