

Time to get ready. Time to get set, and almost time to get growing. Did you know that starting all plants from seed, whether indoors or outdoors, requires similar growing conditions — heat, moisture, light and a quality rooting medium (soil)? Due to maintaining an artificial environment, seed starting indoors requires a little more attention than starting seeds outdoors. Allow me to share a few critical indoor seed-starting tips to insure success.

Most everyone knows that when starting a new business, location, location, location is critical. Although one is not creating a new business, location is also a top priority when seed starting indoors. Select a location in the home where the least amount of temperature fluctuation occurs. A constant temperature of 60° F. to 70°F. works best. An area close to water and an area where it may get a little messy is the preferred choice. Note, I wish to emphasize the word messy.

Having now addressed heat and moisture, the next requirement is light. Unfortunately, sunlight during the winter months has low intensity, and if the days are cloudy or it is snowing outdoors, little quality light enters the windows. Starting seeds indoors mandates supplemental lighting. Some seeds require light in order to germinate while others prefer total darkness. Most seed packets have cultural requirements printed on them. The seed packet will usually indicate whether light is needed for germination or not. Once the seeds have germinated, appropriate lighting is indispensable. An insufficient light source causes the seedlings to grow tall, spindly and weak. Supplemental lighting, and preferably supplemental fluorescent lighting, is vital. Obviously, a sophisticated plant stand with built-in lighting would be ideal, but a basic four-foot fluorescent shop light with two 40-watt cool-white, tubular bulbs is all that one needs. Using a simple holiday light timer to regulate length of light exposure will also be needed. For successful plant growth, a light source exposure of fourteen to sixteen hours per day is recommended. Placing the light source as close to the plants without touching the foliage achieves strong healthy plants and being able to adjust the light source upward as the plants grow is critical.

With the help of warmth and moisture, seeds contain all that is necessary for new plants to develop. Although not essential for germination, once the seedlings have emerged, a quality rooting medium (soil) is necessary. Avoid using garden soil. Using a sterile seed-starting mixture prevents disease problems and

eliminates most soil-borne pathogens that are often found in common garden soil. A quality potting mix is light, creating little resistance for seeds to germinate and making transplanting easier. A potting media, formulated especially for seed starting, drains freely, yet retains enough water for seedling roots to develop and grow. It is also free of disease-causing organisms. For years, I have successfully started seeds in a sterile, garden-variety vermiculite. Once germinated, and when the seedlings have developed a true set of leaves, I transplant them to a potting soil mix. Again, by reading the cultural requirements printed on the back of the seed packet, one can learn if the seeds need to be lightly covered when planted or simply sprinkled on the top of the starting mixture.

Lastly, since quality potting soil is necessary for seed starting, containers for holding the soil are also needed. Use only sterilized containers. If using old containers, wash them with warm, soapy water and rinse them in a 1:10 chlorine/water solution. The bottom of the container should have drainage holes.

In the meantime, if interested in seed starting indoors, purchase the seeds, secure the location, acquire the lights, procure the potting soil and collect the containers. Once achieved, get ready, get set and together, we will get growing.