



The recent warm temperatures have many gardeners itching to get outdoors and start planting. Right now might not be the ideal time to plant most vegetables outdoors in Nebraska, but it is one of the best times to begin planning and planting for the upcoming vegetable gardening season.

Don't let the idea of starting your own transplants scare you off. Starting your own transplants can be a rewarding experience as long as you follow a few simple rules and have the proper equipment. The first step is deciding what you want to plant in your garden. Once the vegetables have been selected, figure out what needs to be started indoors and what can be direct seeded, planting the seeds directly in the garden soil. Beans, beets, cucumber, pumpkin, squash, melons, peas, lettuce and greens are ideal vegetables for direct seeding. Vegetables like broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kohlrabi, eggplant, pepper, and tomato do best when placed outdoors as transplants rather than direct seeding.

Next sort the vegetables into cool season and warm season crops. Cool season crops like broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, and kohlrabi, can handle cooler spring temperatures, along with an occasional light frost. These crops can be planted in the garden earlier in the year compared to warm season crops. Eggplant, pepper, and tomato are warm season crops and shouldn't be planted in the garden until after the threat of cold temperatures and frost has passed, usually around Mother's Day.

Once you have your vegetables sorted into warm season and cool season crops, it's time to break out the calendar. Cool season crops can be planted in the garden as early as April 1st and as late as May 10th. In order to have vegetable transplants ready to plant in the garden around April 1, they are going to require to be started indoors 6-8 weeks prior to that. Count backward from April 1, which means cool season transplants would need to be planted indoors as early as February 17th. Warm season crops will also take about 6-8 weeks to get to the proper size, but they shouldn't be planted into the garden until around May 10. Again counting backward 6-8 weeks from May 10, the warm season crops should be started indoors around March 22nd. Keep in mind these are just guidelines. Technically warm season crops can be planted in the garden earlier, but you have to remember we live in Nebraska and there isn't any guarantee for a 'normal' spring. If you want to roll the dice and plant in the garden earlier, plan accordingly with planting the transplants earlier, but be prepared for Nebraska's weather.

There are a number of containers that are commercially available for starting plants indoors. From plastic trays, to plastic cell packs, to peat pots, or compressed peat pellets, the key is finding the one that works best for you and your budget. It might take a little experimenting, but there is an option out there for everyone. Once you have selected the container, the next decision is to select the proper soil or planting media. The media has to have good drainage and remain soft so the seedlings can sprout. Garden soil does not work well for starting seeds. It is often too heavy and doesn't drain well enough for new little seeds and it can crust over, making it difficult for seedlings to sprout. A soil-less mix or potting media will work in most instances. Vermiculite is also a common seed starting media.

Now comes the fun part, the planting. After the container has been filled with media, add the seeds. If you are using cell packs, 1-3 seeds per cell will ensure at least one will sprout. If you are using a tray, make sure to leave room between seeds so you can easily pull out the seedlings to transplant into a larger container. Cover the seeds with a sprinkling of fine potting mix or vermiculite and water thoroughly with a fine sprinkle or mist. If the container comes with a plastic cover, place that on now. If your container doesn't, you can use cling wrap to keep the humidity high for the seedlings, just make sure that the seedlings don't stay too wet.

The most important thing now is the light. A sunny window or providing supplemental artificial light will help to ensure the plants grow quickly. If you notice your plants are stretching out, that is a signal that they need more light.

This is just the first portion of this story, there is more to come. Plan ahead and start thinking of starting your transplant crops now and we will cover more successful tips as the season progresses.

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