

Yard and Garden - 03-16-2013 - Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Winter is over and spring has arrived. If you are like me, you're more than ready to get outdoors and start planting. Unfortunately, we are still a good eight weeks away from our last expected frost date. Knowing this, we must remain patient. Although a few greenhouse seedling plants are already for sale, it is still a bit too early to plant them outdoors.

Certain plants can tolerate the cold better than others. They are referred to as hardy plants. The same applies to seeds. Some seeds can be planted directly into the soil when conditions are still quite cool, while others need much warmer temperatures before they will germinate. Within two weeks I'm reasonably sure the soil will be warm enough to plant directly into the garden hardy seeds such as radish, spinach and lettuce; however, it would be too soon to plant less tolerant seeds such as tomatoes or peppers. Most gardeners purchase greenhouse-grown seedlings of tomatoes and peppers rather than waiting for the soil to become warm enough to plant seeds outdoors. Such action usually guarantees a much earlier harvest for these vegetables.

An early harvest can also be accomplished if one starts tomato or pepper seeds indoors. Seed starting requirements for both outdoors and indoors are similar: however, starting seeds indoors requires a little more attention since the environment needs to be artificially maintained. I share with you a few tips for indoor seed starting success.

Select an area in the home that can accommodate messy situations such as spilled potting soil and water.

You will need seed packets, potting soil mix, pots and trays with good drainage holes, access to water and a very bright windowsill— or better yet, a moveable fluorescent light fixture with an automatic timer.

When to plant is critical. One common mistake beginners make is starting seeds too early. For example, tomato seedlings grow rapidly. If planted too early, the seedlings quickly become overgrown, requiring multiple indoor transplantings before conditions are favorable outdoors. Determining when to plant in conjunction with the last expected frost date is crucial. Such info is printed on the back of the packet.

Using only a lightweight potting soil formulated especially for seed starting works best. It drains freely; yet it retains enough water for seedling roots and is free of disease-causing organisms. Avoid using ordinary garden soil.

Although most any container with good drainage will work, it is best to purchase specially designed seed starting pots and trays. If using old equipment, disinfect in a 10% bleach solution (1 part bleach to 9 parts water).

After planting seeds according to directions, watering is necessary. For small seeds or surface-sown seeds, water from the bottom in trays that wick the water up into the potting

soil. If applied from above, the water may wash away or bury the small seeds too deeply. Carefully pour off excess water once the potting soil is completely moistened. To keep potting soil from drying out, cover with clear plastic or a clear cover designed especially to fit the tray. Normal room temperature is generally warm enough for most seeds to germinate.

Although it is possible to grow seedlings on a sunny windowsill, you will get better results if you grow them under bright, adjustable fluorescent lights. As soon as tiny sprouts become visible, remove the cover. This allows air to circulate around the seedlings and minimizes disease problems. Place the lights a few inches from the tops of the seedlings and set the lights to illuminate 14 to 16 hours per day. As the plants grow, raise the fluorescent lights.

A few weeks after seedlings start growing, it may be necessary to thin them. Select the strongest seedling and snip off extras at the soil line. Continue to care for plants by watering when needed and lightly fertilizing with a water-soluble fertilizer until they are ready to harden off and transplant outdoors.

Even though the danger of frost exists for eight more weeks, why not get a jump on spring and start some seeds indoors.