

IN THE DIRT

Backyard Farmer *HELPING YOU FIND SOLUTIONS TO YOUR LAWN AND GARDEN QUESTIONS*

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Backyard Farmer YouTube Channel

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Tips & Tricks for Successful Seed Starting

Starting your own seeds is an excellent way to prepare for your year of gardening. Whether you grow vegetables or flowers (or both), starting from seeds can offer many benefits. Of course, there are some dos and don'ts for getting the most mileage from your seed starting endeavors.

Here are some good tips and tricks to help make your seed starting successful:

Be economical. One of the great benefits of starting plants from seeds is saving money. A packet of several (even hundreds) of seeds is often around the same price you'll pay for one plant at the garden center. Of course, if you go out and splurge on the fancy (and expensive) seed-starting systems you see in your garden store or favorite catalog you may end up investing more than you planned. Instead of fancy seed starting trays or peat pellets and pots, use low-cost or recycled items such as takeout containers or shallow disposable aluminum baking pans to start your plants.

Start seeds in clean, sterile seed-starting mix. This is one area where I don't skimp. You'll want to use a sterile mix that is primarily made of peat or coconut coir. It is lightweight and pathogen free, so

you will be less likely to lose plants to such issues as damping off (a fungus that rots the seedlings off at the base). Using regular potting mix may work, but increases your chances of such issues. Plus, seeds are equipped with enough nutrients to make it to their first set of true leaves before they need anything from the soil.

Transplanting. Once the seedling has its first set of real leaves, you should transfer it to an individual pot with regular potting soil. At this point, the plant will need to have nutrients from the soil to grow healthy. You'll want to loosen the plant from the seedling mix (I use a chopstick) and lift it by the leaves (not the stem). Temperature control is key.

Temperature. Heat is usually the most important factor in coaxing your seeds to sprout, so placing your newly sown seeds in a warm (around 75 degrees Fahrenheit) place will help them germinate faster. Fast germination is key for making sure you get the optimal number of seeds sprouting.

However, moving the seedlings to a cooler place (around 65 degrees) after they're germinated will make them grow sturdier and keep them from getting thin and leggy. Most people laugh when I tell them, but one great warm place to start seeds is on top of the refrigerator.

Light is necessary for good plant growth. Most seeds don't require light until they get their first true leaves, but after that you'll want light to keep your plant healthy. Some people are lucky to have a good, sunny (usually south facing) window with plenty of light. Otherwise you'll need to invest in some lighting. The most economical option is a



basic shop light fixture from the hardware store. You can buy plant lights, or full spectrum lamps for it, but if they prove too difficult (or expensive) to find, use a regular warm fluorescent and cool fluorescent bulb to get the right light spectra. You'll want light on for about 16 hours per day. If you are using a window, be sure to turn the plants regularly to keep them from growing in one direction.

Don't get started too early. Look at the packet for the number of days/weeks before last frost to start your seeds. If you start them too early, you could end up with spindly, leggy plants or ones that have grown too large for their containers. Even if you have good lighting, your plants will not thrive being cooped up in the house too long.

Source: John Fech, Extension Educator-Horticulture

PLAN FOR FRUIT TREE SPRAYS

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

Most fruit tree sprays begin just as growth starts in spring or right after blossom drop; however, now is the time to plan for fruit tree spray schedules.

It is a schedule. Fruit tree sprays need to be applied at the correct time and frequency to work. Applying a pesticide just once, or after the problem is noticed, is rarely effective in controlling a damaging pest.

Trying to grow fruits that are not scarred by disease or insects is a frustrating challenge for home growers. Pesticides are often needed to control insect pests, although growers can choose to share fruits with insects if they prefer not to use pesticides.

For fruit tree diseases, selecting resistant trees will go a long way in reducing the need for pesticides. When selecting what type of fruit tree to grow and which cultivar, look for those that have resistance to disease.

Some of these cultivars are listed in our publication "Fruit Tree Cultivars for Nebraska". This free NebGuide is available at extensionpublications.unl.edu; or by calling your local Extension office.

For example, in this guide the apple cultivar Liberty is listed as being very resistant to fire blight, scab, powdery mildew and cedar apple rust while Jonathon is shown to be susceptible to fire blight and cedar apple rust.

For spray applications, the type of pesticide used and the timing and frequency of application needed to control a pest depends on which pests are causing issues.

Positive pest identification is the first step in selecting a pesticide and knowing when to spray. Once the pest is identified, the life cycle of the pest can be determined. It is the life cycle of the pest that determines application timing and frequency.

Spray timing is critical. If you wait until after the problem is noticed to spray, it is too late for most pesticides to be effective. Also, if a pesticide is not applied at the correct time in a pest's life cycle, it is not likely to work.

For fungal diseases, fungicides need to be applied when fungal spores are being released and infections are occurring. This is typically in spring during rainy periods, but it depends on the type of disease.

Insecticides labeled for use on fruit trees are most often applied while adult females are laying eggs. After eggs are laid and hatch, insecticides may no longer be effective. This is because some insects lay eggs just beneath the skin of young fruit with a needle-like ovipositor where they are protected from insecticides.

To responsibly use pesticides effective in reducing damage, now is the time to begin planning for fruit tree sprays. Call your local Extension office for information or refer to the website Missouri Extension Fruit Spray Schedules for the Homeowner at <https://extension2.missouri.edu/g6010>.

Once a pest is positively identified, this website is very helpful in listing the timing of application, how many applications are needed, and which pesticides to use.

Fast Forward to Spring

Forcing Flowering Branches

After another long, cold winter, it's time for some reminders that spring is just around the corner. The winter landscape can be beautiful, but it can also drag on for what seems like an eternity. The perfect remedy to chase away the dreary winter blues and bring some spring color into your home is to force some branches from your favorite spring-blooming shrubs.



Cherry and plum branches are good candidates for forcing into bloom indoors.

When to Harvest Branches

Almost any shrub that blooms in early spring can be forced into bloom inside. Many ornamental trees and shrubs set their flower buds during the summer for bloom the following spring, go dormant in winter and come out to bloom when exposed to warm temperatures and moisture. Late winter, the best time to prune deciduous trees and shrubs, is also the best time to cut branches for forcing. The flower buds are generally fatter and more rounded than leaf buds.

The farther into spring you collect branches, the earlier they will open. Some woody branches will take up to three weeks to bloom, while others will flower in a week or less. No matter how long it takes, this is a great way to have a few blooms indoors while you wait for the arrival of spring.

Good Forcing Techniques

It's best to cut branches for forcing when the outside temperature is above freezing – they will be more pliable and make a better transition from cold outdoor temperatures to warmer indoor temperatures. When you get inside, recut the stems by a few inches under running water to prevent air from being sucked into the vessels. Make sure you cut the stem at an angle to give the branch a larger surface to drink in the water.

After the branches are cut, hammer or split the cut ends, then submerge the branches in very warm water in the bathtub for about four hours to allow the buds to absorb water directly. Afterwards, you can stand the cuttings in a deep bucket of warm water with a plastic bag over the tops to increase the humidity overnight. The next day, you can stand the branches in fresh warm water with a floral preservative dissolved in it and put the container in a bright location.

You should start forcing at 50 degrees Fahrenheit; higher temperatures at the start will blast the buds. After a couple of weeks, you can speed up flowering by moving the buds to a warm room. Check the branches frequently; they will need regular misting to prevent buds from drying out. You should also change the water every three days.

Select branches that are at least 1 foot long with many enlarged buds and prune branches from all sides of the shrub to maintain symmetry. Whichever shrub you choose, make sure you cut each branch all the way to the main stem. You can always shorten the branches later if they are too long for the vase.



What Plants to Choose?

Pussy willow, flowering quince, and forsythia are among the most common and easiest woody plants cut for forcing. Nanking cherry, cornelian cherry dogwood, vernal witchhazel and clove currant are not as common but are very easy to force and they make excellent landscape plants as well. The spicy clove scent and rich yellow color of the clove currant will brighten any day.

Suitable branches can also be cut from other willows, wild plum, serviceberry, cherries, lilacs, flowering quinces and red maple. It's best to wait until March or perhaps April to take cuttings from harder-to-force ornamentals such as crabapple, magnolia and redbud. Late winter is also a great time to collect the bare branches of hazelnuts, alders, birches and hornbeams to force and elongate their slim, pendulous catkin flowers.

Source: <https://communityenvironment.unl.edu/acreage>