

The Grapevine

Starting Seeds at Home (Part 1)

The weather over the weekend was simply beautiful and it's really had me thinking of spring these days. Over the last week, while I've been at home, I took some time to sort through my garden seeds and get ready for this year's gardening season. While we are still a few weeks away from starting vegetable seeds inside we can start many of our annual flowers inside right now. Let's go over the basics of seed starting and trouble shoot some common issues, so you have some tips to help get started this spring.

Timing is one key to being successful when starting seeds for your garden. Most of our vegetable varieties will need to be started six to eight weeks and flowers up to twelve weeks before you plan to set your plants outside in the garden. Most of our plants will need to be held inside till after the threat of frost is over; I usually recommend planting around the end of April or first part of May since our average last frost is in mid-April. This gives the ground some extra time to warm up and reduces the chances a late frost will have us scrambling to cover our plants. If we follow the recommended start times we would start planting vegetable seeds



starting the first weekend to mid-March and flowers should be started the first weekend of February. There are a couple exceptions to the above starting dates, our broccoli, cabbage, etc. can be planted before the frost-free date or the end of March to early April so those would be started the first weekend of February and our vining crops should be started a couple weeks later so they don't get too big. Be sure to check the packaging of the seeds you are starting to verify how long is recommended for that particular variety.

Once you have figured out when to start your seeds, the next big issue to address when starting seeds is lighting. Seedlings need a minimum of 12 hours of light in order to prevent long leggy growth. Unfortunately, we can't get that using sunlight in a window alone so some supplemental light will be necessary. Luckily seedlings do not require high quality expensive light sources to grow successfully. Seedlings need a high quantity of light, but it doesn't have to be high quality. I have found that using fluorescent light fixtures with one warm or daylight bulb and one cool light bulb provides the correct spectrum of light that seedlings need to thrive. The bulbs need to be positioned four to six inches above the tops of the seedlings to provide enough light to prevent stretching. As the seedlings grow, move the lights up higher. I usually use a timer set to have the lights on for 14 hours to make it easier to manage the light system.



Once you have figured out when to start the seeds and have the lights ready to go, the next step is what to grow the seedlings in. Any container can be used from garden trays to plastic cups, to recycled plastic containers, to paper pots as long as it has good drainage so the plants don't drown. When starting seeds make sure to use a high-quality seed starting mix or peat pellet to start your seeds in. Don't use soil from the garden to start seeds in as there can be weed seeds, diseases or insects in the soil that could damage or kill your seedlings. I usually use the peat pellets to start my seeds in but that is what I've had the best luck with based on my watering schedule and the varieties I'm starting. Try a couple different options to see what works best for you. Once you have planted your seeds, use a plastic dome or bag to ensure the seed mix doesn't dry out while the seeds are sprouting. A heat mat under the seed mix can also help speed up

the germination process by keeping the soil warm. Using bottom heat can also help encourage uniform germination so the seedlings are all about the same age for care and transplanting.

Starting seeds at home is one of my favorite winter time activities. I love to watch the plants grow from tiny seeds to fruitful plants that provide food for my family. While I won't be starting seeds for another month I have started getting my area ready and making sure I have the supplies lined up that I need. I'll talk more about care of seedlings once they have emerged and how to transition them outside in a couple weeks as we get closer to starting seeds at home. Happy growing and I hope you enjoyed the beautiful weather we had this weekend.

Reminders-

- During warm spells this winter, be sure to water newly planted trees and shrubs in your landscape. Even trees that have been planted in the last 2-3 years will benefit from some watering during the winter. An easy method of watering is to take a 5-gallon bucket, drill a 1/8" hole in the bottom and place the full bucket near your tree to let the water drip out. After it empties move it to the other side of the tree and fill it again. Be sure to try to water at least 12" into the soil if you are using a sprinkler system. Deeper watering is more important than frequent watering to encourage the new root system to grow.
- If you are using seed collected from your garden or seed you purchased that is more than a couple years old, I would do a germination test with the seeds now before we start planting. To test germination, place several seeds between layers of damp paper towel and place in a plastic bag. Keep the paper towel damp and check the seeds for germination over the next two weeks. Remove seeds as they germinate and at the end of the two weeks figure out how many seeds germinated vs how many didn't.

Upcoming Events

- *February 2, 2022: Indoor Seed Starting*

Discover the fun of starting your gardening season off early by growing your own bedding plants indoors. Learn the steps to growing healthy plants you can transplant into the garden this spring. Gregg Eyestone, Riley County Horticulture Extension Agent, will explain how to save money growing those hard-to-find plants you want in your garden this year!

Register here: https://ksu.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_2MfHtfkEQS6ql8Q_vr9OYA