

The Grapevine

Starting Seeds at Home (Part 1)

The weather last week was simply beautiful and it's really had me thinking of spring these days. Over the last few weeks, I have been taking 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 most of vegetable seeds we can start many of our annual flowers seeds along with some cole crops right now. Here are some tips to help you get started this spring including the basics of seed starting and how to trouble shoot some common issues you might encounter.

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 plant your plants outside in the garden. Most of our vegetables and flowers will need to be held inside till after the threat of frost is over; I usually recommend planting cold sensitive plants outdoors 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 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 while 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 to verify what is recommended for that particular variety.



Once you have figured out when to start your seeds, the next big issue to address 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 from 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 not 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

for my lights to have them on for 14 hours to make it easier to manage the light system.

Once you have the basics such as 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 plant 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.

Once the seedlings have started to germinate it is time to remove the plastic dome or covering. While the seeds need moisture to germinate, too much moisture can lead to disease issues and seedling death. Continue to keep the soil damp for the first few weeks after the seedlings have emerged. It's easy to kill seedlings by letting them get a bit too dry. Once the seedlings have 2-4 small leaves it's time to transplant them into a larger pot or container and continue to let them grow until it's time to transplant them outside. During this time continue to water them regularly and fertilize at a half strength to prevent any deficiencies be cautious as too much fertilizer can lead to long, leggy growth and weak transplants.

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. Over the weekend I plan to start my broccoli and some flower seeds so I've been making sure my area is set up and ready to go. I'll talk more about how to transition seedlings outside in a future article as we get closer to that time. Happy growing!

Houseplant of the Week-

This week's houseplant of the week is the Amaryllis. While the poinsettia reigns supreme as the most popular seasonal plant, my personal favorite is the amaryllis. I have had the joy of being gifted some truly beautiful ones during my lifetime, including the one to the right that was given to me by my grandma. True *Amaryllis* are native to Africa but most of the bulbs that we purchase at the store are not actually of the *Amaryllis* genus but of the *Hippeastrum* genus and are native to Central or South America. These beauties can be purchased as bare or planted bulbs and are prized for their gorgeous trumpet shaped flowers. Flower colors range from white to deep burgundy with a variety of shades in between. My favorite have double flowers.



The bulbs come in a variety of different sizes however the bigger the bulb typically the better the performance and more blooms. Look for bulbs that are firm and dry with no signs of mold or decay. If there are leaves already growing pick a bulb with bright green new growth. When planting, pick a pot that has a diameter one inch wider than the widest part of the bulb. When properly planted 1/3 to 1/2 of the bulb should be above the soil. Be sure to firm the medium around the bulb to hold it steady. Water when the top 2" of the soil feel dry. Fertilize amaryllis when you water at 1/2 of the recommended rate when new growth is visible. After flowers have faded remove them and cut the bloom stalk off when it turns yellow. Move the plant to a bright direct light and treat it as a regular houseplant till it's warm enough to move the plant outside. Once the threat of frost is over, move your amaryllis outdoors and slowly move it to where it will receive at least 6 hours of sunlight every day. Be sure to fertilize once a month. In the fall bring the plant inside and let it go dormant for 8-12 weeks to encourage it to bloom again.

Reminders-

- During warm spells this winter, be sure to water trees and shrubs in your landscape. Evergreens are especially susceptible to drying out during periods of warm dry winter weather. 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. Trees that have been planted in the last three years should be watered once a month in the winter. Don't forget to water your cool season turf grass too.
- 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 calculate how many seeds germinated vs how many didn't.
- Test your soil to get a head start on the planting season. More on soil testing will come next week.

Upcoming Events

- *February 1st at Noon: More Plants From Your Plants: Introduction to Vegetative Plant Propagation*
Vegetative propagation, cloning, and asexual propagation are all terms used to describe the process of making new plants that are genetically identical to your existing plants. Join Dr. Jason Griffin, Woody Ornamentals Horticulture Extension Specialist, as he discusses the basics of plant propagation for the hobby gardener. With a little knowledge and some simple tools, learn how to be successful propagating your plants. For more information on the Garden Hour series [click here](#).
- *March 1st at Noon- Houseplants: Basics and Beyond*
Over 66% of U.S. households have at least one houseplant, but often the terms used to describe their care can be confusing. Join Cassie Thiessen, Post Rock District Horticulture Extension Agent, & Calla Edwards, Butler County Horticulture Extension Agent, as they decode common houseplants terms related to light, water, and other plant needs. Learn about some unique houseplants and the best practices to keep them thriving. For more information on the Garden Hour series [click here](#).
- *March 6th at 7 pm- Planning and Problem Solving in the Garden*
Gardening has become an extremely popular activity in the United States. Many of the biggest issues that gardeners have start with not planning the garden out and getting it started correctly at the beginning of the year. Join us to learn the basics of planning the garden from where to plant to when, why rotating plants is important and to cover some basic problem solving for the most common issues that gardeners face. This event will be at 7 pm at the Augusta United Methodist Church at 2420 Ohio Street, Augusta, KS.
- *March 14th at 6 pm- So you want to grow vegetables in containers?*
Are you interested in growing your own vegetables but live in an apartment, have a shady backyard or have a physical limitation that prevents you from gardening in the ground? Container vegetable gardening is a great way to still grow your own vegetables on your window sill, patio, porch or even your front step. Join us at the Bradford Memorial Library to learn how to grow your own tomatoes, corn, herbs and any vegetable in a container.