

Spring into Seed Starting

By Dr. Matthew Lisy, UConn Adjunct Faculty

There is nothing better than sitting by the fire on a cold winter’s night with a brand new seed catalogue. Due to COVID, more people were home this past year than ever before paying more attention to their gardens as well as growing their own food. The good part is that the retailers seem to be ready for this, not getting caught off guard like last year. I hope this trend continues, as one of the most environmentally friendly things we can do is grow our own food and support local farmers for the rest.

The reasons to start from seed are many. For some, it is a hobby, and a way to get into gardening before the outside is ready to cooperate. For others, it is a bit of security and a stress reducer, as they know they will have the plants they want this spring. For me, it is a nice way to get the varieties that I want when they are not commercially available.

The key to successful indoor seed starting is that timing. If seeds are started too early, your plants may get tall and lanky and run out of key nutrients. Alternatively, plants started too late may be tiny with underdeveloped root systems. To determine when to start seeds count back the number of weeks listed on the seed packet from the last frost date, which is about mid-May for most of Connecticut. So if, for example, the packet says start 8 to10 weeks before planting out, seeds would be started early to mid-March. Start dates will vary by crop. In addition, not all plants can tolerate transplanting. Beans, squash, and cucumbers, for example, are best sown directly in the garden. Tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant are less sensitive and can handle the transplanting process much better.

In order to germinate, seeds need the proper moisture and temperature. Heat mats speed germination but are pricey and need to be used with a controller. Seeds will germinate at room temperature, but it may take longer. Although pots or plastic cups can work, many people prefer to use plug trays to start seeds. Standard sizes include 128, 72, 50, etc. These refer to the number of plants you can fit into the tray. Plants must be sized to the appropriate sized plug or pot. Use any commercially available seed starting medium to fill your plug trays or pots. Some varieties may just be sprinkled into an open tray for sprouting and transplanted on from there.

The plug trays will need to be kept in some kind of basin that holds water. Unless you are starting in a greenhouse, be careful to purchase trays with no holes in the bottom. Be careful not to overwater as that can lead to disease. Generally, the seed starting medium only needs to be kept moist during the germination process. Once the plants are up and growing, allow some drying between waterings.

After the seeds sprout, light is essential and often a window is not enough. A simple old-school four-foot shop light works well and is economical. Hang the lights a few inches above the growing plants. For bulbs, one can use one “cool white” and one “warm white” light bulb or for a bit more money, one could buy a specialty plant grow bulb and a daylight deluxe light bulb. All of these bulbs have different spectral outputs (different colors of light). Simply put, plants need lots of red and blue light to grow well. One can even find special LED plant lights with blue and red LEDs. These fixtures are much more expensive, but they do not burn out or lose output like the fluorescent bulbs. Either way, as your plants grow, you can raise the lights above them to accommodate their height.

Now is the time to purchase seeds. Many local garden centers, big box stores, and mail order catalogs all carry a large selection of seeds. Buy what you can reasonably plant in a season, otherwise you may find yourself with a lot of leftover seeds. Use the information in the catalogue to figure out how many seeds are needed for your space. Unused seeds may germinate the next year, but they must be stored properly.

Try starting some flowers and vegetables from seed. Start off small, with only one or two types or varieties of plant. Tomatoes are probably the most forgiving of our garden plants and are a great place to start. As always, I recommend a soil test for best gardening results!

For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

