



Seed Starting Tips

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Starting your own seeds is a satisfying and economical way to provide transplants for your gardens and containers. Plus there are many more varieties of tomatoes, peppers, you name it, available as seeds than as transplants at the garden centers. Also, seed starting is a reliable way of growing healthy plants, free from pesticides in the exact quantities needed for your plantings and maybe a few extra for friends, families or local plant sales.

Beginning seed starters are encouraged to try easy to grow varieties like tomatoes, peppers, marigolds and other sure to please plants. Cleanliness is key to growing great seedlings. Start with a sterile seed starting or other soilless mix, clean pots or cell packs and fresh seeds. Some seeds can remain viable for several years but unless stored properly their germination rate often declines.

While it is not that difficult to germinate seeds, growing the plants on often requires supplemental lighting and suitable temperatures. It is not necessary to invest in expensive tiered grow light setups; even a small fluorescent set up or single grow light bulbs can supply your seedlings with sufficient light. Many garden seeds germinate best at temperatures between 65 and 75 F so if your home is colder, maybe consider investing in a heat mat to place under pots or trays.



Look at seed packets to determine when to start your plants. Typically they would say how many weeks before the last frost date to start them; tomatoes, for example, are usually started 6 weeks before the last frost date, which in most of CT is around mid-May, although it may range from early May by the shore to late May in the Litchfield hills. So now is the perfect time to start seeds that should be planted about 8 to 10 weeks before the last frost date. Another item to note on the seed packets is how deep to plant the seeds or if they require light to germinate.

To get started, gather your seed starting medium, small pots or cell packs, flats with clear plastic domes to set the pots or cell packs in, a spritzer and small watering can, a dibble or chop stick to make holes for seeds, tags for labeling, light source, a notebook and possibly a heating mat. Sort your seeds by the date you need to start them and read their planting instructions.

Place some of the seed starting mix in a clean bucket and add enough warm water to thoroughly moisten but not saturate the medium. Then fill your small pots or cell packs. My general rule of thumb is to plant larger seeds, like tomatoes or zinnias, two per cell in a 4 or 6 cell pack. After the first set of true leaves is produced, the weaker seedling is culled.

For smaller seeds, such as basil or celosia, I plant a couple dozen seeds in a 3-inch pot or larger, shallow flat. After the first or sometimes second set of true leaves are formed, these will be transplanted into cell packs or small pots.

Usually larger seeds, like tomatoes are planted about one-quarter inch deep. Small fine seeds are typically sprinkled on the surface and lightly pressed in to make contact with the growing medium. Both should be misted lightly after sowing to ensure the medium settles and there is good contact.

If starting several types of seeds at once, it is usually easiest to set them all in a plastic tray that would come with a clear plastic dome cover. For just that one or two pots or cell packs, you can place them in a clear plastic bag that is twist-tied shut. This is to keep in the humidity. Open the plastic bag if too much condensation is noted. Remove either the bag or clear plastic dome top once seedlings emerge.

New seedlings appreciate 14 to 16 hours of light each day. If using fluorescent lights, keep them about 3 inches above seedlings. Adjustable lights work very well for growing seedlings as they can be raised as the seedlings grow.

When plants have one or two sets of true leaves, they can be either thinned if grown in cell packs or transplanted into larger quarters if grown collectively. When transplanting, let the medium dry out slightly so plant roots will be easier to separate. Use a commercial potting mix such as Pro-Mix, Fafard, or Jiffy Mix to transplant into. Moisten the mix, fill the containers and use a dibble or chop stick or similar instrument to separate the seedlings, make a hole in the mix and set the seedling. Water just enough to settle and place back under lights. New roots should form in just a few days and plants should show encouraging vigor and new growth.

Be sure to harden transplants off before setting in the garden. For questions about starting plants from seed or if you have any other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden

Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.