



STARTING FLOWERS AND VEGETABLES FROM

Seed catalogs with gorgeous pictures of luscious vegetables and lovely flowers are seductive. But many of us have tried and failed to produce sturdy seedlings like those sold by the nurseries and fall back on buying seedlings rather than starting our own from seed. However, starting from seed is far less expensive and greatly expands the choices of varieties. It can also be very satisfying.

So, you may ask, how can I get the best results and what equipment do I need? There are a number of products on the market for starting seeds. Bags of "seed starter" from the hardware store often produce the best results using plastic pots, but a cut off milk or cream carton with a few holes in the bottom works too. When reusing pots or cartons they need to be thoroughly washed and rinsed in a mild bleach solution in order to eliminate undesirables (insects, mold, bacteria etc.). The pots can be placed on a plastic or metal tray, which acts both as a drip tray and to facilitate bottom watering.

Peat pots and cow pots are recommended for certain vegetables, such as eggplant, which do not like to have their roots disturbed in transplanting. However these pots dry out more quickly and so more frequent watering is required. Cell packs accommodating dozens of seedlings are useful when starting large numbers of annual seeds. However, the water and nutrients are quickly depleted in the small amount of soil per seedling, therefore frequent watering is needed and fertilizing with liquid fertilizer every week or two is recommended. Liquid fertilizer is also recommended for many vegetable seedlings.

Although seedlings can be raised on a sunny windowsill, the hours of direct sunlight are typically too short resulting in leggy seedlings. Using grow lamps and shelving offers a better solution, keeping the lights only an inch or two away from the bulbs and leaving them on for 16 hours a day. Four-foot long work lights with dual fluorescent tubes can be suspended above seed trays allowing them to be raised as the seedlings grow. Alternatively, the seed trays can be placed on a pile of newspapers or magazines and gradually lowered.



Air movement is important using a small fan to make the seedlings strong and daily misting is also helpful, although this should be done away from the grow lights as it may significantly shorten their life.

When should I start the seeds? This depends on both the speed of growth, and hardiness, and therefore when you can safely transplant outside. Fortunately most seed packets have recommended dates based on the average last frost date, which is early-to-mid May for Rockport, in zone 6b. Vegetable planting information can be found also on the Web.

<https://garden.org/apps/calendar/?q=01966>

<http://www.ufseeds.com/Zone-6-Planting-Calendar.html>

<http://veggieharvest.com/calendars/zone-6.html>



Some of the early dates given on these websites are too early for Rockport where we have cold springs and warm falls. Planting tomato seeds early March may result in plants that are too big for grow lights before the weather is warm enough to transplant outside. Delaying 2-3 weeks is recommended if you do not have a sunny conservatory or greenhouse to put them in when they outgrow the lights.

Starting flowers from seed can be a bit more difficult, and it is important to know what you are getting into when buying a packet of seeds. Fortunately there is some great advice available:

<http://www.gardeners.com/how-to/growing-annual-flowers-from-seed/5663.html>



Before planting out, seedlings need to be hardened off. This is accomplished by setting them outside for a few hours a day. Initially out of the wind and mostly in shade and gradually moving them out into the sun.

Finally, any leftover seeds should be stored in a cool, dry place for next year. Kept in the fridge, some varieties will remain viable for decades, others only a year or two. In all cases the viability drops over time so it is best to plant several seeds per pot and weed out all but the strongest seedling.

Good luck!

P.S. If you produce more seedlings than you need, you can give them a good home via the Rockport Garden Club Plant Sale!