



## Three Key Hints for Starting Your Own Seeds

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Starting your own vegetable plants from seed makes a lot of sense for community gardeners. For the modest price of a seed packet, a community garden group can grow more than enough tomatoes or peppers for an average vacant lot-sized garden. That's not all – you also have a potential educational benefit if you can get kids involved in the process, and you can grow choice varieties – especially heirlooms – rarely available in garden centers. You can also time your growing so you've got top quality seedlings ready to go at the best time for your particular gardens.

To reap the rewards, though, you have to do things right. To thrive, our tiny crop, like all babies, needs tender loving care applied with common sense techniques. Doing it right doesn't, by the way, require spending a wheelbarrowful of money.

In the next issue of *Community Greening*, you'll find a longer article with more detailed information on starting seeds. In the meantime, keep these three key points in mind:

**1. Timing is everything.** You want your seedlings to be ready on planting day, which means paying attention to the calendar. For spring planting, determine your last frost date (Cooperative Extension agents and their Master Gardeners often have this information at their fingertips), and work backwards. Start warm weather crops like tomatoes and peppers roughly 6-8 six weeks before that date. For instance, if you can plant out on May 1, you can start your tomatoes indoors on about March 15. No sense in rushing – I've seen people start warm season crops far too early.

If you just have to grow something, start a cool season crop, like broccoli and lettuce. These can be planted outside 2-3 weeks before the last frost (and even earlier with row covers or in mild-climate areas), so you can start them earlier, 10-12 weeks before the last frost. Example: If your last frost date is May 1, you can start your spring broccoli in late February-early March.

Remember, not all plants are well suited to transplanting. Some, like beans, root crops (turnips, radish, beets...) and most melons (in my opinion), do better planted directly in the garden. And, once the ground is warm, it's sometimes easier to simply direct seed crops like cukes, leaf lettuce and okra.

**2. Let there be light!** The problem I see most frequently with indoor seedling projects is lack of light. Once veggie seeds have germinated, they want bright and ample light for 14-16 hours a day. A south-facing window isn't enough. The least expensive way to provide the needed light is with plain ordinary shoplights with regular fluorescent bulbs (no fancy 'grow lights' needed). You need to suspend the lights just above the growing baby leaves – just an inch or two, literally right down on top of them. Since you need to be able to move the lights up as the plants grow, you can suspend the lights from the ceiling or on a simple frame.

**3. Getting it right.** Getting started can be especially confusing. There are some excellent web-based how-to guides and a couple of excellent reference books – use them! I like Purdue University's guide at [www.hort.purdue.edu/ext/ho14.pdf](http://www.hort.purdue.edu/ext/ho14.pdf), and Whitney Farm's site at [www.whitneyfarms.com](http://www.whitneyfarms.com). In print, I recommend *New Seed Starters Handbook* by Nancy Bubel (Rodale Press), and *Caring For Seedlings* by Shepherd Ogden (Brooklyn Botanical Garden).

Bonus hint – if you are new to all this, start small, with just a single plastic seedling tray or the equivalent, and pick easy plants, such as tomatoes. Let them be your (forgiving) teachers the first time around. Next season, you can go for broke, once you've learned the ropes.



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