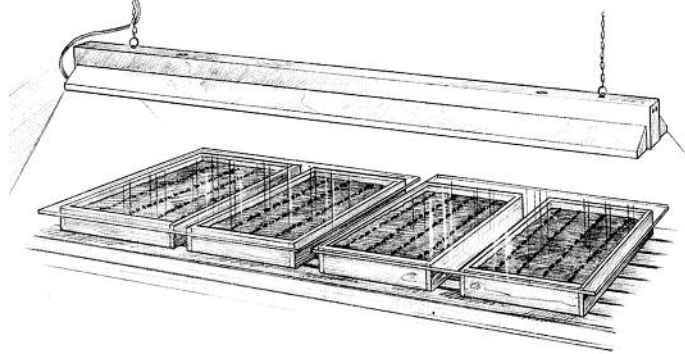


Starting your own seeds

What's the best reason for starting your own seeds? Selection! Many seed catalogs specialize in a particular cultivar, say tomatoes. They may offer more than 200 varieties. This easily makes tomato seedling selections from any nursery seem like a limited menu. Commercially grown seedlings are usually grown for reasons such as: ease of germination, quick growth, shipping quality, color and shelf life. What about flavor? Most home gardeners grow for flavor period. Plan to start your seeds indoors, then set them out when they are at the proper stage of development and the weather permits.



1 Get the best seeds!

Choose seeds of varieties that do well in your area. If you want to grow plants from your own seeds in the future, be sure to use parent seeds described as open pollinated or heirloom. Seeds from a hybrid, which is the result of crossing two plants, will not produce a plant identical to the hybrid.

2 Starting mix

There are some great seed starting mixes on the market. Starting mix is a lightweight medium that will stay moist without compacting. Standard ingredients are vermiculite, perlite, peat moss, and sphagnum moss. This is a soilless mix that lessens the chance of a common seed starting disease called damping off, which rots stems and topples seedlings.

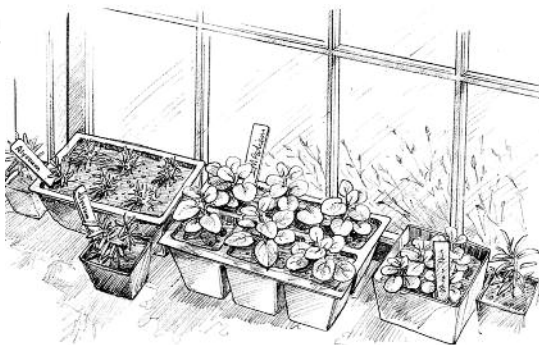
3 Successful sprouting

Fill your flats or small plastic pots with the soilless mix, moisten with warm water. This eliminates the need for top watering immediately after sowing so the seeds won't be displaced.

Next, look at the size of the seeds, this will dictate the depth of planting, check the seed packet for directions.

YOU MUST KEEP THE PLANTING MEDIUM MOIST AND WARM.

Place planted flats or containers on a heated seed starting mat or in a warm spot in the house, on top of the refrigerator, clothes dryer, near the water heater, or window sill. Some seeds need light to germinate, some don't, so check your seed packet!



4 Light

Light is necessary once the seedlings emerge. When growing indoors you have two choices: natural or artificial light. Seedlings need a lot of light and spindly growth will tell you if they're not getting enough. Grow lights or fluorescent lights are best. Place seedlings under lamps for 12 to 16 hours a day. Keep the seeds the right distance from the source—nearly touching when the plants are newly emerged, increasing up to 4 inches later. Plants in a sunny window can grow leggy reaching for the sun, so rotate them a quarter turn each day.

5 Spacing & pinching

Overcrowding will diminish air circulation and light. Thinning out overcrowded flats is necessary to ensure healthy seedlings. Pinch or use small scissors to nip plants at the soil line, this makes for less disturbance of the roots.

6 Harden off

The timetable for hardening off plants depends on outdoor temperatures. Your seedlings should be ready once they have two or three leaves beyond the seed leaves.

Transplant seedling into larger pots. Gradually introduce tender plants to the garden. Place them in a cold frame or in dappled shade or on the covered porch. Gradually move them into a sunny location for 5-7 days before transplanting them into their new home.

Use wooden stakes to properly label seedlings, this is a simple way to keep track of your plants.

