



Get a jump on gardening by starting seeds indoors

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By **Roxanne Washington**, *The Plain Dealer*



It won't be long before gardeners can commence their favorite activity: running their fingers through soil or some other growing material and nurturing tiny seeds as they gradually mature into beautiful flowers and mouthwatering vegetables.

Not outdoors, of course. Not yet.

Starting seeds indoors is how gardeners get the planting urge out of their systems until it's warm enough to continue outside.

If you're not experienced at starting seeds indoors, there's no special trick to coaxing them upward. All you need are the appropriate containers and growing medium, the right amount of light -- whether natural or artificial -- and the willingness to devote the attention that very young plants require.

After you've decided which flowers or vegetables you'd like to get a head start on, carefully read the instructions on seed packets, because care and growing duration vary by plant.

"The time spent indoors will depend on the particular plant being grown, as far as when to start them, because some plants will take a shorter period of time, and others will take longer to be a transplantable size, which is 3 to 6 inches tall, for planting outside in spring," says Stephan Winterfeldt, a horticulturist for **Park Seed Co.** in Greenwood, S.C.

"In general, start most annual vegetable and flower seeds indoors six to eight weeks before the last frost date in your area," Winterfeldt says. "Tomatoes and peppers need eight weeks. Flowers such as impatiens, geraniums, petunias and vinca are longer [growing] crops and can take anywhere from three to four months to go from seed to large plants in full bloom, so these can be started early, say in February."

Zinnias and marigolds are good choices for novice seed-starters because they aren't that complicated to coax along, says Jerry Gorchels of **Ball Horticultural Co.** in West Chicago, Ill.

According to Ed Hume Seeds in Puyallup, Wash., many seeds don't need to be started indoors because it's easy to broadcast them directly into the garden. Examples are nasturtiums, alyssum, California poppies, sunflowers, columbine and wildflower mixtures.

Some gardeners save seeds year to year, but Winterfeldt recommends using new ones.

"It would be a good idea to start with fresh seed," he says, because you'll have better luck with seeds that haven't been handled.

For a growing medium, Winterfeldt prefers a commercial seed-starting mix because it's formulated for that purpose, in that it tends to be lighter in weight and drains well. With soil from the garden, there is a possibility of exposing the seeds and seedling plants to insects or disease.

Seed-starting kits -- which can include everything from grow lights to pots and trays, to labels and markers -- can be purchased on many garden products websites and at garden centers.

Seed packets include instructions for how deep seeds should be planted and the amount of space between them.

For germination and seedling/plant growth, the experts say to provide darkness at night and at least eight to 12 hours of light per day. If that much window light isn't available, use plant grow lights.

The most common plant lights use fluorescent bulbs -- cool white and/or warm white fluorescent tubes. Lights should be kept 1 to 4 inches above the soil or the growing plants, and you should adjust the height as the plants grow.

Room temperature matters, especially if you are growing seeds in a cool basement. Most seeds will germinate at around 70 degrees. If your basement is cold, you probably want to use a seedling heat mat under the flat or other container the seeds are growing in to warm the soil.

Water with a gentle spray mist, and check the soil every day. You may not have to spray daily. It's important to keep the plants moist but not wet. Wet soil can rot the seeds and cause seedlings to get fungal disease.

Once the weather is warmer, slowly acclimate the seeds to the sun and outdoors. This should be done over one to two weeks in spring, starting with about an hour of morning sun the first day and then gradually exposing them to more sun each day over that time period.

Before planting them in the ground, dig or till the soil and incorporate organic matter such as peat moss, planting mix, manure, or compost to enrich the soil and improve structure. A general purpose fertilizer could be worked into the soil during preparation or as a top-dressing after planting.

To offer gardeners more advice, Ball Horticultural Co. and **Burpee Home Gardens** collaborated to create the Burpee Garden Coach, a free mobile Web tool. Through text messages and Web-based interaction via mobile phone, the Burpee Garden Coach supports vegetable gardeners with tips on choosing, growing, maintaining, harvesting and eating, Gorchels of Ball Horticultural said.

Features include:

- Timely advice with text messages throughout the gardening season providing planting date tips, maintenance reminders and support to improve vegetable gardening success.
- Access to the complete Burpee Home Gardens selection.
- Local weather forecasts.
- Recipes, including harvesting ideas and inspirations from garden to table.
- Information about retail locations that have Burpee Home Garden plants (because it's their product).

For details about the Burpee Garden Coach, go to burpeehomegardens.com and click on "Garden Help" or watch the tutorial video here.

