

Starting *seeds* indoors



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As a general rule, most plants are ready to go outside four to six weeks after you start the seeds.

Question: This year I want to use grow lights and start my seeds indoors. How and when do I get started? And which seeds should I plant?



Linda Estep
Ask a Master Gardener

Answer: There are several advantages to starting seeds indoors. Getting an early start on the growing season is probably the primary reason.

Starting seeds indoors allows you to gain a few critical weeks of growing time. Another advantage is that starting seeds indoors provides more choices than what you may find if you buy transplants, and you will be able to include harder-to-find varieties.

Many types of containers are suitable for starting seeds. Planting containers need to be at least 2 inches deep. Anything you use must have drainage holes at the bottom. You could buy new planting containers, but it is really not necessary. It is totally fine to use what you already have, but you do need to disinfect any recycled pots, trays or flats.

It is important to clean the containers that you

use otherwise you may experience damping off from the mold (or left-over pathogens) and your seedlings will wilt. Clean with soap and water, plus sterilize used containers by soaking the cleaned containers in a solution of bleach or other disinfectant for 30 minutes, then rinse.

It is best to use a commercial seed-starting mix since it is lightweight, sterile and free of weed seeds. Potting or garden soil is not recommended due to the heavier weight and the potential of weed seeds, insects, and pathogens.

Most seeds do not need light to actually germinate. However, once germination has occurred, the seedlings need plenty of bright indirect light. Grow lights truly do make a difference and they don't have to be expensive. Grow lights provide strong light directly above



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which promotes strong, vigorous, upright growth.

Suspend a large fluorescent shop light from chains a few inches above the seedlings. Once the seedlings appear, keep the lights turned on for 12-16 hours per day.

Don't leave the lights on all the time because many plants actually need a dark period each night to develop properly. A simple automatic timer on the lights is an easy way to manage the light/dark requirements. Raise the lights higher as the seedlings grow. The lights should be 4 inches above the plants as they grow.

Some people start seeds indoors by putting the

planting containers next to a south-facing window. Generally, this is not recommended for a few reasons. One is that the winter sun does not provide enough light for healthy, robust seedlings. If the seedlings do not get enough light, they will get tall and spindly and sometimes flop over.

Also, the temperature along a windowsill is inconsistent, and the new seedlings will grow better with a consistent temperature that grow lights provide.

In addition to providing enough light, you will have even more success if you add an electric heating mat, specifically for

seed starting, under your containers. Make sure you don't plug the heating mat into the timer you are using for the lights. Heating mats provide a consistent temperature and this will allow your seeds to germinate sooner and will produce healthier roots.

Don't start your seeds too soon. Take the time to carefully read individual seed packets. Timing is everything. Count backwards from your frost-free date the required number of weeks stated on the package to have your plants ready at just the right time. You want to plan on the transplant date occurring after the last frost.

In Roseburg, the last spring frost is generally about April 5. As a general rule, most plants are ready to go outside four to six weeks after you start the seeds. Remember to label everything because most emerging seedlings look alike.

Not all seeds should be started indoors. Some should be planted directly into the soil. Tender vegetables like tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers are very susceptible to the cold temperatures of

spring, so it's best to start them indoors and keep them safe from unpredictable weather.

Other crops that are best started indoors include broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage and cauliflower. If you want to start flower seeds indoors, good choices include zinnia, cosmos, marigold, cornflower, aster, phlox, verbena and snapdragon.

Starting seeds indoors will give you a head start on the gardening season. By starting seeds, you will be able to grow varieties not available any other way.

My favorite aspect of starting seeds indoors is watching the growing process from the very beginning. I hope you have great success with your seed starting.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.