

Seed Starting Basics for the Home Gardener

*Class for the Concord Free Public Library, Fowler Branch, spring 2024
Jess Myles, Instructor. Contact info: LuzYTierragarden@gmail.com*

What you need

Soil mix

Containers— reuse or recycle plastic pots, tp tubes, newspaper

Water— in watering can

Seeds— often seed packets have info on them— but tons of info online

Labels— popsicle sticks

Dish for seeds when sowing

Pencil or sharpie

Soil mixer— plastic tub, big bowl

Cookie sheet or pan to catch seeds (especially if younger helpers are involved)

Garden gloves

First step: prepping soil

Choosing soil: potting vs raised bed vs seed starting vs compost. Prices really vary!!

Good mix is free of viable weed seeds (or is sterile), drainage and water absorbing, ph neutral. May have perlite in it, some nutrients with organic matter a must. Potting mixes are typically finely grained soil mixes and much better for seed starting than raised garden bed soil mixes.

*Some high end brands are: vermont compost company mix, black earth is local and a good source – but really lots of other brands work just fine. **Avoid using your own compost as is may have weed seeds in it that will make identifying your seedlings tricky if they grow, too.*

GET WET:

How wet is enough? When is it too wet? — squeeze test. Hydrophobic when very dry like new sponge. You should be able to form a loose ball that holds its shape but easily fall apart when you move your hand.

Step 2: get organized

- Label sticks— plant type and date
- Dish for seeds
- Containers: RECYCLE when possible!
 - Why I like plastic over fiber pots, why no peat pots*
 - How to use recycled containers— drainage!!
 - Egg cartons not enough soil for busy people
 - Recycled dome covers
- Make paper pots— Grab wooden dowel thing, a few items
- Tray for pots

*peat pots: (I didn't mention this in class in 2024, but I try to avoid peat moss products when possible because harvesting peat destroys an important carbon sink ecosystem! Plenty of other materials work so no need to use peat moss for starting seeds)

3. Prep pots

How much soil?

How to get the right density for good soil contact, but not too dense that roots struggle to grow through soil -pack like loosely packed brown sugar

Want to fill pots to top— max benefit of pot size and shade out issue

Plants need light, water, nutrients, and AIR! Also right temps to germinate

4. About seeds

What to plant and when? Where to source seeds?

- Think about days to harvest. A 90 day crop sown today will be ready in mid August! Farmers and gardeners need to plan ahead, but not too late for late summer and fall crops at all.
- Our zone is 6b and frost date is till 5/15— greenhouses, cold frames, row cover for season extension
- Some plants are typically direct sow or “DS”— beets, carrots, radishes, arugula, spinach. Tap root crops especially.
- Favorite seed sources: library with seed lending library program! Seed savers exchange, Fedco, Johnnys, territorial seeds, high mowing seeds, hudson valley seeds, Geo seeds, even the “botanical interest” brands at hardware store can be great. So many good sources. I’ve also bought unusual seeds on etsy with good results, but that is a bit more “buyer beware”.

5. Start sowing seeds

- How deep?? Vegetable seeds not too picky – depth of your index fingernail (or $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ ") often just right.
- In general, you can sow the depth of 1-2x the longest part of seed. Some exceptions. Remember to place your label!!
- Germination: most veggies sprout w/o special treatments.
- Some seeds need light to germinate, and you press into soil and cover to keep moist. (you can use Vermiculite and 4" pot to keep moist)
- Some big seeds do best when soaked first. Beans, large grains, etc.
- Temps: some like cold to germinate (spinach) while others like heat (tomatoes)
- Some seeds - esp natives – need cold stratification to germinate. Ex: milkweed, bells of ireland. Try container with wet paper towel in the fridge for 2-4 weeks, depending on the crop

6. Watering in

- Always water in your seeds! Deeply esp at first.
- Gently so as not to disturb soil— watering can or bottom water (and soil with “wick” up the water – just make sure the pots don’t stay in standing water once they are fully wet). Pros often use “fogg-it” spray nozzles and love them for delicate/tiny seed crops
- Make sure to get water all through soil in containers.
- The area around seed is most important— top ½ inch or so typically, but soil has wicking action— constantly losing moisture from surface. Humidity domes can really help, especially when seeds are just on the surface of the soil
- Water so as not to let dry out completely, but AVOID too much watering as it fills up all air pockets in soil, and roots need air, too.
- Check soil moisture by putting your finger along the side of the pot – you should feel a cool temp if there is still moisture in the soil
- Your plant will also tell you if it is dry!! Truly the best indicator. If droopy , water.
- Too much water can result in bacterial wilt and can kill the plants too – first sign is green algae growth on surface of the soil

9. Wait and watch!

- Opportunity to watch, to observe

WHEN ready for transplant?

- Harden off— put outside for a week to expose to wind, changing temps, outdoor weather
- You need at least 1 set of true leaves, but really when the plant fills up the pot with roots is good sign of transplant maturity.
- “Root bound” is when the plant’s roots are too far developed for the pot size and you may have waited too long to plant out in your garden (or your plant source waited too long!) Sometimes stunted growth results from this, but do your best to pull apart roots from the “pot shape” and give the plant a chance. Often it can recover just fine when given a little time.

Happy gardening!!

-Jess