

Timely Turf Tips

March 2013

Don't just stand there, plant something! It's time to gather your seed starting supplies. One of the best ways to get through the dark, cold days of the end of winter is to plan and prepare for a garden. Whether you map out your garden plot, scour seed displays, or just dream of sinking your teeth into a vine ripened tomato, planning a garden can be as emotionally healthy as it is physically healthy. One way to get a jump on the growing season is to start flower and vegetable plants from seed indoors. Plants can get as much as 4-6 weeks head start on seeds that are started directly in the ground. It's a great way to stretch your gardening budget too!

Soil: For very best results, use a sterilized soil or potting medium. If you bring in soil from outside, you will also most definitely bring in weeds, fungus and insects or other pests. It's much easier to head down to the Mill to pick up a bag of sterilized soil. Follow the directions on the packet for planting the seeds. Some require very little or no soil coverage.

Light: Your seedlings will need about 14 hours of direct light a day. This may be the biggest challenge in starting your seeds indoors. The sun will move past even the brightest window in your home, causing your seedlings to stretch towards the light and become leggy. A fluorescent light, positioned a foot above the tallest plant, will create more of an even light source. Fluorescent lights work great because they emit very little heat and will not dry out your plants. Using a light timer set at 14 hours works great!

Water: For seedlings, it is better to water from the bottom than from the top. Simply set your pots in a pan filled with 2 inches of water and let the soil or potting medium soak up the water like a sponge. Getting the right amount of water might take a little trial and error, but it's better to err on the side of "too little" because too much water will produce a weaker seedling. Before your seeds germinate, cover your seedlings with plastic wrap or a plastic dome. You will not need to have them under a grow light but they should be in a warm location. However, after the plant emerges, remove the plastic and move the seedlings under the light.

Hardening Off: Once your seeds have grown, they will be ready to move outdoors when the temperatures warm. It's very important to get your seedlings used to being outside by hardening off. To do this, simply set your plants outside, out of direct sunlight for about an hour on a calm day. Double this amount of time every day until the plants have stayed out all day. After about 4 days, your plants will be ready to go in the ground.

Suggested Varieties: Great flower varieties to start indoors include: zinnia, marigold, petunias, lobelia, stock, snapdragons, dusty miller and coleus. Vegetables that do well when started indoors include spinach, lettuce, chard, cabbage, cauliflower and broccoli. Start these indoors in late February and March. Cucumbers, tomatoes, squash, pumpkins plus the other warm weather vegetables can be started indoors in April.

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