

# Starting Seeds Indoors Early

## How To Get Started

Starting garden plants from seeds indoors can be an enjoyable project for any gardener. It's a relatively inexpensive way to grow a wide variety of plants.



### Suggested Sowing Dates

The last killing frost in eastern Nebraska is usually April 11-21. Very established protected sites, planting on the 11th is possible. In the suburbs and open areas, the 21st is more likely a frost free date. These are general dates, each year can be different. The following guide is the number of weeks the seeds should be started indoors prior to the last frost date in the spring.

#### Vegetables

10 WEEKS	Broccoli, Cabbage, Cauliflower, Head lettuce
7 WEEKS	Tomato, Eggplant, Pepper
4 WEEKS	Cucumber, Cantaloupe, Squash, Watermelon

#### Flowers

14 WEEKS	Pansy, Violets
12 WEEKS	Lobelia, Stock, Black-eyed Susan vine, Impatiens, Petunia, Snapdragon
8 WEEKS	Vinca, Salvia, Statice, Sweet alyssum
6 WEEKS	Aster, Cockscomb, Marigold, Cornflower
4 WEEKS	Zinnia, Portulaca, Cosmos

#### Lighting

A windowsill is NOT a good location for starting seeds. Windowsills can be the coldest place in the house, especially at night, and then the hottest during the day. Sunlight through a window is relatively weak, compared to artificial light sources kept close to the plants. There are also many cloudy winter/early spring days of very low light levels in Nebraska. Fluorescent lights—either tube or spot light—should be no more than 2-4"

above the top of your seeding tray. The light should be lit 12-16 hours per day. Adjust the height of the fluorescent light as the plants continue growing—always maintaining the 2-4" rule. Don't leave the lights on continuously, as many plants need some dark period during the day to develop properly. A simple timer can be part of the set-up.

#### Containers & Seeding Medium

Start seeds in small, individual containers. It is best to use divided containers with a single seedling per container. Plastic sheets of small containers, called "cell flats" fit into standard solid trays. Peat pots are also available so there is minimum root disturbance at planting time. Compressed peat pellets are about the size of a silver dollar. When placed in water, they swell to form a cylindrical container filled with peat moss, ready for seeding. Seed-starting mixes, usually composed of perlite, sphagnum peat moss, Dolomite limestone, and a wetting agent, is very porous and allows a perfect environment for tiny seedlings. Fill the pot with the mix and water it well before sowing seeds. The mix may settle down into the container. Add more mix and water until the container is nearly full. Many gardeners use clear plastic domes that fit over trays of plants. These domes allow light in, but help keep moisture from escaping.

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They can also help retain heat provided to the root zone. Obviously, the domes have to be removed when the seedlings are tall enough to touch them!

### Bottom Heat

Providing a constant heat source from underneath can be very beneficial to seedlings. Temperatures in the potting mix can be as much a 5-10 degrees lower than the indoor air temperature. A waterproof electric heat mat, usually 11" x 22" fits perfectly under a seed starting tray. A heat mat operates 15-20 degrees above ambient air temperature. It is not a fire risk. It needs to be kept under the seedling tray until the plants develops their first set of true leaves.

### Watering & Fertilizing

Keep the potting mix moist while the seeds are germinating. Water can be either poured into the plastic tray or applied from the top with a gently stream. Pour off any excess water that remains in the tray after 30 minutes to keep roots healthy and damping off fungus from developing. Seedlings draw energy for germination from nutrients stored in the seed. They don't need fertilizer until they have several sets of true leaves. Seedling grown in soil-less mix will benefit from a weak general purpose water-soluble fertilizer mixed ¼ strength. Fertilize only once a week. Water as needed the rest of the week with plain water.

### Hardening Off Seedlings

About two weeks before planting outdoors, start hardening off the seedlings by moving them outside for increasingly longer periods each day. Start by putting them outside for only an hour in the shade during the warmth of the afternoon. Choose a spot protected from wind. Bring them back inside before evening temperatures drop. Each day, leave the plants out a little longer, and expose them to a little more direct sunshine. By the end of two weeks, unless freezing temperatures are forecast, the seedlings can stay outside in a sunny area until you are ready to transplant them into the garden.

Our Garden Center has all of the products mentioned as well as the largest selection of seeds to choose from.



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