



## Getting Ready to Seed

**By: Charlie Nardozzi**

Even though the holiday season is upon us, it's easy to let your attention start to drift towards gardening. It can be difficult this time of year to restrain your gardening passion. One way to quell the fire is to start some of your own seeds indoors this winter. While it's too early to start seeds indoors in most parts of the country, it doesn't mean you can't get all the supplies and seeds ready now.

Starting your own seeds indoors has many advantages. Not only will you satisfy your inner desire to grow something green in the dead of winter, you'll be able to try unusual varieties not normally found at the local garden center, and you can grow larger quantities of plants less expensively.

Here are some tips to starting your vegetable seeds indoors at home.

### **Seed Starting Starts with Seed**

It all starts with the seed. If you have old packets of seed that you've stored in a cool, dark area, chances are you can use those seeds again and they will germinate successfully. The germination percentage will be lower than that of new seed, but still acceptable. You'll just have to sow it little thicker than usual.

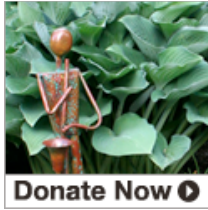
If seeds are more than three years old, or it's the type of vegetable seed that doesn't store well, such as leeks, then it's better to buy fresh seed. When in doubt, buy new seed because you'll be guaranteed good germination.

Vegetables that need to be started indoors to grow and mature outdoors in summer include tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, and leeks. You can start onions, broccoli, lettuce, watermelon, cucumber, and squash early indoors as well, or you can sow seed directly into the garden in spring. Do a little of both to get both early and late crops of your favorite vegetables.

For the timing of seed starting and detailed information on specific crops, check out the Food Gardening Guide (<http://willhiteseed.com/food.php>).

### **Seed-Starting Soil**

Seeds need the right type of soil to germinate well indoors. Common garden soil or regular houseplant potting soil is too heavy for good results. The best soil for seedlings is a seed-starting mix, such as the Jiffy mix. A mix like this is typically a blend of peat moss, vermiculite, and perlite. The mix is light, so seedlings can easily break the surface, yet it holds enough water to keep the seedlings growing. Some seed-starting mixes may even contain timed-release fertilizer.



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### Potter Up

Another consideration is the type of pots or flats you use. If you're starting lots of seeds, consider using seed-starting flats. You can sow rows of seeds in these rectangular flats. As they grow, you can thin them, and then transplant into individual pots. If you're growing a just a few of each type of crop, consider growing them in individual pots.

Seeds need heat and moisture to germinate well. Soil temperatures ranging between 75 degrees F to 85 degrees F are ideal for most seeds. Try a germination station (<http://willhiteseed.com/proddetail.php?prod=335>). It includes a heating coil or mat that lies under the pots and a clear plastic dome lid that maintains ideal humidity for seedling growth.

Whether you're starting a few seedlings or a few trays of seedlings, eventually you'll need to transplant them into individual pots or six-packs. Common choices are plastic pots and peat moss pots (<http://willhiteseed.com/products.php?cat=109>). While plastic pots hold water longer than peat moss pots and are recyclable, peat moss pots can be planted right in the garden, pot and all, so the process is less damaging to seedlings' tender roots.

### Light Them Up

Because of winter's shorter days and lower light levels, it's a good idea to invest in an indoor light system to support your seedlings once they germinate. Seedlings grown even in a sunny, south-facing window will quickly get tall and leggy. Leggy plants are stressed plants that won't grow and produce as well as stocky plants.

For a simple light system, purchase shop lights with two to four fluorescent bulbs in each fixture. Use full-spectrum fluorescent bulbs that provide the light intensity and wavelengths that your plants need. Keep the bulbs a few inches above the seedlings once they germinate, moving them as needed to maintain this distance as the plants grow. Put the lights on a timer and set them to stay on 14 to 16 hours per day.

### On-Going Care

Water young seedlings from the bottom to avoid knocking them over with a heavy surge from a hose or can. Once they're more established you can water from above with a gentle spray. Be sure there is good air circulation around the seed-starting containers, and don't overwater or your seedlings may succumb to damping-off disease, a fungus that thrives in wet soil and stagnant air. It can kill seedlings overnight. Set up a small fan to circulate the air and help dry out the soil until the seedlings get established. The circulating air also encourages sturdy plant

growth.

Start fertilizing when the seedlings grow their first true leaves (the first that emerge are considered seed leaves.) The best fertilizer is a dilute organic formula such as fish emulsion. Water and fertilize in the morning so the leaves dry by evening, reducing the chance of disease.

If you're growing seedlings in flats, transplant them into individual six-pack's or pots once they have their first set of true leaves. Remember to harden off your seedlings before planting them outdoors planting.

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Viewing page 2 of 3

[\[<<\]](#) | [Prev](#) | [1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [Next](#) | [\[>>\]](#)

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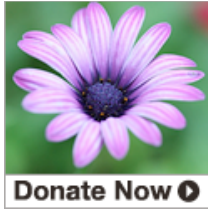


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## Getting Ready to Seed (cont)

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### QUESTION OF THE WEEK

#### Soaking Pea Seeds

Q. Each spring I plant peas only to have many rot before they germinate. What can I do?

A. Peas will germinate in cool (40 degrees F) soils, but the soil must be well drained. If you get a period of cool, wet weather after planting, seeds can rot before germinating.

To enhance germination, grow pea seedlings on raised beds so the soil will drain more quickly. Another option is to pre-germinate your seeds before planting, which gives them a head start and reduces the amount of time the seeds are sitting in cold soil trying to grow. To pre-germinate, place pea seeds in a moist paper towel and place it in a cool, dark location. Keep the towel moist until seeds begin to germinate, then plant them in the garden.

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Viewing page 3 of 3

[\[<<\]](#) | [Prev](#) | [1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#)

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