

March 14, 2018



Seed Starting for Spring and Summer Crops
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Now is a good time to start planning your summer vegetable garden. How much room do you have? What would you like to grow? Where do you like to buy your seeds? These are all questions you'll need to answer before starting. Acquire your seeds, check your Vegetable Planting Guide*** for the best times to plant the items you want to grow, and let's get started!

In many parts of our county beets, chard, carrots, radishes, and onion relatives can be planted directly into garden beds during March. Other seeds can be started indoors, so the plants will have a head start once the ground warms sufficiently for transplanting next month. For indoor seed starting you will need planting medium, clean containers, water, and fresh, good-quality seeds. Many items will work to contain your seedlings; however flats, pots, or six-packs are recommended. Good drainage is imperative, so choose a planting medium that is sterile and drains well. For various reasons, garden soil is a poor choice for container planting, and usually produces disappointing results indoors.

Some seeds, such as lettuce, require light to germinate. Others require darkness. Your seed packet will help by suggesting the best depth at which to plant the seed. Seeds requiring light can be placed directly on top of your dampened planting medium and misted with a fine spray of water. Seeds requiring darkness can be started by poking holes in the dampened medium with a pencil and dropping a seed or two in each or by placing the seeds on top of the medium, then using your hands to sift a fine layer of medium over them. A thorough dousing with the finest mist of a spray bottle will settle them in.

For seeds that require warmth to germinate, such as tomato and pepper seeds, bottom heat will be helpful. Many gardeners use seed-starting heat mats for this purpose, complete with thermostatic controls. The optimal germination temperature for tomato seeds, for example, is 80 degrees. The California Master Gardener Handbook has a chart showing germination temperatures for many common seeds.

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Covering the container with a transparent lid, either store-bought or hand-made out of plastic wrap, will slow evaporation and help maintain even moisture for your developing seedlings. Be sure to allow some ventilation. Maintain even moisture, but not so much that the containers are standing in water. Never allow the seedlings to wilt.

When your seedlings are about a week old, you should remove the lid and provide them with as much light as possible. To provide the optimal amount - sixteen hours per day, you may need to suspend a fluorescent tube about six inches above the seedlings. This is an important detail, as insufficient light will produce weak and leggy plants which will never catch up with their better-lighted brethren.

At this point you can use a liquid fertilizer, diluted to half the recommended strength, when watering your seedlings. Once seedlings develop their first true leaves they can be transplanted into larger containers.

When outside soil temperatures are approaching 60 degrees, begin the process of hardening off your seedlings. Over a two-week period, begin to decrease humidity and gradually increase exposure to sunlight and to cooler temperatures until they are “toughened up,” at which point they are ready to be transplanted into the garden. After transplanting, don’t forget to protect them from slugs, snails, birds, and anything else that might be looking for a free lunch!

Join us at the upcoming “Propagation from Seed” for a class on the selection and germination of seeds, starting media, growing out, hardening off, and transplanting seedlings. Following the presentation, participants will have an opportunity to start seeds and take those home. Seeds and containers will be provided - bring clean gloves to participate. The date: March 17, 9:00 a.m. to noon. Place: Sherwood Demonstration Garden, Placerville.

*** For El Dorado County gardeners, there is a very useful “Foothill Vegetable Planting Guide.” This excellent resource is a laminated calendar with adjustments for the differing elevations in our County. The Guide helps us determine the best times to plant different vegetables and when to expect harvests. Copies are available at the UCCE Master Gardener office in Placerville and at our public education classes. The price is \$5.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.