

Seed starting in February to early March

President's Day usually marks the Kickoff of the garden growing season!

Several vegetables and flower seedlings can take temperatures down to 25 degrees with little to no damage and will grow even without warming the soil.

If your soil is saturated, do not cultivate. Saturation means that water has replaced the air in the pore space and working the soil in this state can do more harm than good.

To test saturation, dig down 6" and grab a handful of soil. Compress into a ball with one hand, toss up 6" into the air and let it fall into your hand. If the ball falls apart into crumbs you are good to go. If it stays in a ball or barely comes apart it needs to dry out more. You can dry the soil by covering with plastic for a couple of weeks and test again. Soils with clay will take much longer to dry out. Raised beds are much more suitable to early planting, so consider mounding soil, with or without edges, in the future, to give you your go-to space for winter gardening.

If you want to be ready for bizarre weather, just keep some harvest guard floating row cover or remay cloth on-hand- I use it to protect things from hail, hard frost, or hardening off transplants from indoor. It lets light and water through.



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OUTDOOR- DIRECT SEEDING

Vegetables

Peas--- any and all peas (snow peas, shelling peas, fava beans) can be direct sown outdoors as long as you have great drainage. Planting on a raised mound or making sure your pots are draining freely can make the difference of success vs 'where did my peas go'.

Garlic
Shallots
Onion sets
Radishes
Fennel
Chervil



Flowers- ok to direct sow outdoors

Some even need frosts to germinate properly, poppies are a good example of this.

Alyssum

Baby's Breath

Breadseed poppies

California poppies

Shirley poppies

Sweet Peas

Toadflax (Linaria, baby snapdragons)

Love in a Mist (Nigella)

Johnny Jump-ups (viola)

Forget me nots

Larkspur

Clarkia



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Outdoors with Protection

Protection means covered with something like a cloche, or plastic over hoops or a frame. It is a good idea to cover the area you wish to plant for a week or two prior, to warm the soil and decrease the overall saturation.

Vegetables

Beets
Spinach
Cilantro
Arugula
Broccoli Raab
Cress
Red Mustard, Mizuna
Radishes
Turnips
Pac Choi, Joi Choi
Endive
Lettuce



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Indoor to transplant outside later

Vegetables:

Celery
Parsley
Chives
Leeks
Onion (seeds)
Broccoli
Cabbage
Cauliflower

While you can start peppers, eggplant, and tomatoes this early, I find it nearly impossible to keep them healthy until set-out in May without using a greenhouse to grow them on and pot up, so I refrain at least a month.

Most seed packets will give you guidelines on how long a plant takes to produce, but I usually just plan on a month from seeding to setting out and it works pretty well. If I use heat mats and lights that can speed up germination if I get going a little late, too.

Flowers:

Bee Balm (monarda)
Black Eye Susan (rudbeckia)
Flowering Tobacco
Petunia
Phlox
Snapdragons
Stock
Salvias
Yarrow



TIPS for better results

Sowing seeds indoors can be very satisfying, but the difference between excellent success and weak plants that just won't perk up is pretty simple--- it is LIGHT and AIR

Soil or substrate or whatever potting medium you choose is personal preference. You can purchase a pre-packaged seed mix, or make your own with peat moss and perlite, or use a good potting soil, or make your own from screened compost. Just make sure it drains well and preferably is sterilized (you don't want to start out with fungus gnats the first week)

Carefully consider the Location of your seed starting---- the more light the better, and you want some airflow!

Airflow--- for disease prevention. If your seedlings are in a stuffy room, use a small fan to move the air, it helps combat mildews and fungus. Professional growers all use air movement. Open a window on a nice day and air out the cabin!

Heat- if you grow in an unheated or poorly heated room, you don't necessarily need to heat the air, but the soil. Seedling heat mats are simple to use and bring the soil temperature up to the perfect spot, just plug in and set your pots or flats directly on it. I use heat mats and heat cables to grow seedlings in an outdoor shed. Seeds germinate best at 60 to 72 degrees, so bottom heat is not needed in a heated living space.

Fertilizer- not important at initial germination but as you develop the second set of leaves, use a gentle feed such as liquid kelp, fish, or seaweed blend to help build strong cells and provide nutrition without explosive growth too early in the year. A seedling that is fed too much nitrogen tends to attract aphids, so build them up for strength not size.

TIPS for better results-----LET THERE BE LIGHT

Even in a south facing window you might notice that tiny seedlings lean toward the light, in just a few hours. This is phototropism and the plants move dramatically, sometimes breaking and dying. Lack of light is the #1 problem with indoor starts and it is hard to correct these leggy seedlings aside from dutifully carrying them all outdoors on a warm day and bringing in at night.

The newer your windows, the more you might have issues with UV blocking, so while your couch won't fade is a good thing, your seedlings will lack the broad spectrum they need.

A grow light can be mind-blowing in effectiveness. Your seedlings firm up from floppy, pale stragglers to strong soldiers raring to go! I have used several types, and it allows me to start plants in the garage or in my shed. I always suggest starting seeds on a shelf, I like the wire types as you can suspend a light from the shelf above, but whatever you have on-hand can work. Grow light units with tube-style bulbs can be purchased for \$25 to \$35, but, you can use a round bulb gro-light in a fixture you might already have, or with an inexpensive metal reflector, and the bulbs start at as little as \$5. I don't buy the crazy costly ones, I am not growing marijuana. I just need a little help with my lettuce. The normal kind.

Whatever you use, you must have the light much closer to the soil than you would think. I start mine about 6"- 8" off the soil surface, and raise it as the plants grow. If it is too far away you will still see the plants being phototropic and leaning toward the light. Too close, and you might see some burn on the foliage. Turn your seedlings every day or so if you can't get them all directly under your light and rotate outside to middle so everybody gets a turn.



Planning Ahead-

Sowing seeds into a flat of soil can save space under lights or on heat mats, but remember you must then transplant the seedlings into individual pots at some point- and do you have room for all of them? Tiny packets make large volumes of plants. I ALWAYS underestimate how much space I will need and vow every year to not plant as much. I have yet to hit that sweet spot.

If you are using older seeds, the germination rates can decline significantly on some items, so sewing in flats can make sense. Individual pots are great on fresh seed and things sensitive to transplant, like peas and beans.

Make your own seedling mix:

"Store bought" mix

- 1 part peat moss or cocoa fiber
- 1 perlite (expanded silica rock) and/or vermiculite (expanded mica mineral)
- 1 part sand (washed sharp or coarse) or pumice
- 1 part compost or worm castings



Compost based mix

- 1 part compost, screened through ¼" mesh, ideally
- 1 part sand (WASHED) or grit or perlite

OK, GET PLANNED< GET PLANTED!

