

SEEDLINGS: Sprouts to Maturity

**By: Janean Thompson
Master Gardeners - Potter County**









WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO START YOUR OWN PLANTS?

- To be sure that your plants have been raised appropriately from start to finish
- Greater variety of plants available in seed form
- By sprouting and nurturing your own seedlings, you don't have to wait for warm weather to get your hands dirty
- Best of all, starting your own seeds is easy and fun and economical.



Seeds that do well in home germination:

Some plants lend themselves to home germination better than others.

- Nearly fool-proof vegetables include basil, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, chives, leeks, lettuce, onions, peppers, tomatoes and most annual flowers.



- Some reliable annual flowers are alyssum, cosmos, marigolds, and zinnias.
- Perennials include Shasta daisies, columbines, and hollyhocks.



Finicky seedlings

- Lettuce, melons, and cucumbers are finicky about being transplanted and should go directly from the original containers or seed packets into the garden.



- When starting these fussier plants, always add well-aged, screened compost to your mix to give them a healthy beginning.



- Moisten your medium in the containers before sowing the seeds.



- Next, drop seeds onto the surface of the mix, spacing them as evenly as possible.
- Cover the seeds to a depth about three times the thickness of the seeds.
- Some seeds, such as ageratum, alyssum, impatiens, petunias, and snapdragons, should not be covered at all because they need light in order to germinate.



- Cover the flats with plastic wrap, recycled bottles, take-out trays or similar material to keep their environment humid. Place them near a heat source or on a heat mat made for seed starting. Most seeds germinate well at about 70 degrees F.



- **Keep them damp**

Mist with a spray bottle or set the trays into water so the mix wicks up the moisture from below.



Free sprout containers: Made of newspaper.



- At the first signs of sprouting, uncover and move the containers to a bright spot—a sunny window, a greenhouse, or beneath a couple of ordinary fluorescent shop lights (4-footers with two 40-watt bulbs). The lights are worthwhile. They provide a steady source of high-intensity light.



- Short days restrict window light, and your seedlings need 12 to 16 hours of light a day. Suspend the fluorescent lights just 2 inches above the plants and gradually raise them as the seedlings mature.



- If plants have to stretch or lean toward the light, they can become weak and spindly.
- To turn the lights on and off at the same time each day, hook them up to an electric timer.



- Seedlings don't have to stay as warm as germinating seeds. Move them away from radiators and air vents, or off the heating mat, as soon they have germinated.



- If you're using a soilless mix without compost, begin to fertilize your seedlings as soon as they get their first true leaves. (These leaves emerge after the little, round cotyledon leaves)



- Water with a half-strength solution of liquid fish/seaweed or general fertilizer every week or two. Use either a spray bottle or add the fertilizer to the water you set the trays in if you're using the wick-up method described previously.



- If the seedlings outgrow their containers or crowd one another, repot them into larger containers filled with a mix that includes compost.



- To repot or plant, extract the seedlings with a narrow fork, dibble, pencil, flat stick, etc. and handle by their leaves and roots to avoid damaging the fragile stems. Sometimes it is easy to gently tear a clump apart and separate the entangled roots. Tuck the seedlings gently into the new pots, and mist or bottom-water them to settle the roots.



Get Rough!

- Lightly ruffling seedlings once or twice a day with your hand or fanning with a piece of cardboard helps them to grow stocky and strong. Or, set up a small fan to gently, continuously blow on your seedlings.



Toughen Them Up: Harden Off

- About 1 week before the plants are to go outside, start acclimating them to the harsh conditions of the garden world. Gardeners call this hardening off.



- On a warm spring day move the containers to a shaded, protected place, such as a porch, for a few hours. Each day—unless the weather is horrible—gradually increase the plants exposure to sun and breeze.



- At the end of the week leave them out overnight; then transplant them into the garden.



The Thompson Garden



Janean Thompson

canyonredhead@wildblue.net

1001 Canyon Pkwy
Canyon, TX 79015

806-622-2702