



Starting Your Own Seedlings Indoors

By Doug Zlatin, Community Wellness Committee Member



When the calendar page turns to March, a gardener's heart starts to beat a bit faster. The long dormant winter season is in the rear-view mirror and it is time to start thinking about planting! Starting your own seedlings has many advantages:

- You get to jump-start the gardening season, which helps to end winter doldrums.
- You get to choose the plant varieties you grow, not limited by the choices available at the local garden store.
- You will save money. After the initial investment of setting up your seedling station you will be paying a fraction of the cost for nursery-grown seedlings.
- You have full control over not only what, but how, you grow your plants, and can experience the joy of raising your plant "babies" from seeds.

Growing your own seedlings isn't complicated. You need a tabletop or structure to hold your pots or seed trays, a light source (no window sills!), a quality planting medium, and the time to tend to your plants. The most common way to grow seedlings is on a metal shelf unit or on a table with a light stand. Most gardeners use shop lights (fluorescent or LED) hanging above their plants, with chains adjusted with S-hooks so that you can keep the light source 2-4 inches from the tops of the plants. You can easily build a light stand using PVC pipe (here are a few, there are plans for others available on-line):



Using a quality seed starting mix is important – do not use garden soil or potting soil. Consult your seed packets, as different seeds require different treatments. You'll need to do some math to calculate when to plant, starting with when you want that plant to be ready for the garden and then counting backwards to determine when to start the seeds. Some plants go into the garden in April (chard, lettuce, kale, broccoli), some after the last frost date in mid-May (tomatoes, cukes, peppers, melons, squash, eggplant, most flowers), and others (beans, carrots, corn, peas) go right into the garden as seeds. A wonderful resource for your planning is The Farmer's Almanac: <https://www.almanac.com/gardening/planting-calendar/zipcode/04105>

Your little seedlings will need 14-16 hours of light per day, and the best way to accomplish that is with a timer. Try to keep them moist but not sopping, and a daily misting does wonders. There's no need to worry about fertilizing until the first set of true leaves form, then fertilize lightly every week or so. A few weeks before planting gradually expose your planting to outdoor conditions, a process known as "hardening off". Then, into the garden they go!

There are abundant resources available on-line and in our library's wonderful garden section. One site I would highly recommend is Starting Seeds At Home, from the Cooperative Extension Service: <https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/2751e/>

Starting your own seedlings is a true joy and does wonders for improving our winter-dulled spirits. Try it!