

Tip of the week:

It's about time to start sowing seeds indoors if you like to get a jump on your spring gardening. For specific dates, consult your seed packets. Following are some of the items you'll need to get things going.

Seeds

Flower and vegetable seeds can be purchased at local garden centers. They're also available from mail-order companies.

Germination Medium

Germination media should be lightweight, porous, and free of pathogens. Excellent seed-starting media are commercially prepared soilless mixes, such as Jiffy Mix or Redi-Earth. Use a high quality, well-drained potting mix when transplanting seedlings into individual pots or cell packs.

Containers

Various containers can be used to germinate and grow transplants. Gardeners can purchase flats, trays, pots, compressed peat pellets, and other products. Previously used flats, trays, and pots should be cleaned and disinfected before use. Wash the containers in soapy water, then disinfect them in a solution of one part chlorine bleach and nine parts water. Cut-off milk cartons, plastic jugs, paper cups, plastic food boxes, and other containers can also be used to start seeds.

Lights

While plants can be grown in sunny windows, they often become tall and spindly because of insufficient light. For best results, grow seedlings under fluorescent lights. Light stands are great, but can be a little expensive. A standard fluorescent shop fixture containing two 40-watt tubes is a much cheaper alternative. For best results, place one cool white and one warm white tube in each fixture. The fluorescent lights should be no more than 4 to 6 inches above the seedlings. A timer can be used to turn the lights on and off.

Reference Book

Most seed packets provide germination and cultural information for the crop. Oftentimes, however, the information is rather brief. For many home gardeners, a reference book with more detailed information is an indispensable resource.

Other Materials

A few other materials are also helpful. A rubber bulb sprinkler is a handy watering aid. The sprinkler produces a gentle spray which won't dislodge the seedlings or wash away the potting mix.

Most seeds germinate best when the medium temperature is consistently 70 to 75 degrees F. Placing containers in a warm location in the house, such as on top of a radiator or near a heat register, usually works fine. In cool environments, electric heating cables or mats can be used to insure warm medium temperature.

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