If you are looking for a gardening project this winter, start some garden plants from seeds indoors. It is relatively inexpensive and, with seeds, you can often find a wide range of varieties to choose from.

For the best success in getting seeds to germinate indoors, start with quality seeds and use a sterile seed-starting mix. For containers, you can buy seed trays or create your own pots using strips of newspaper or the bottom half of an egg carton. Whatever you use as a seed pot, just make sure it has a drainage hole. If reusing a plastic seed tray from a previous year, it is a good idea to sterilize the container. First, wash the container with warm, sudsy water. Then soak it for about 30 minutes in a weak bleach solution consisting of one part bleach to nine parts water for disinfecting. Then rinse and let air dry. Starting with sterile growing medium and clean containers lessens the risk of soil-borne diseases affecting your seeds or seedlings.

During germination, place seeds in a warm area. Most seeds need consistently warm soil to germinate and produce strong roots. Many gardeners provide bottom heat by using an electrical heating mat designed for seed starting to keep the growing medium warm. You also want to keep the growing medium moist, but not soggy. With seeds, it is best to mist the soil using a spray bottle or add water to a tray allowing the medium to soak it up. To promote germination, you can cover the seed tray with plastic wrap. This keeps the planting medium both warm and moist. Just be sure to remove the wrap when the plants sprout.

Seedlings must receive bright light right after they germinate. When seedlings receive insufficient light they become tall and spindly or "leggy." Light can be artificial or natural or a combination. Even if you have a window that receives full sun, you may still need to supplement with artificial light. Grow lights or standard “cool white” fluorescent lights will work fine. Ideally, keep the light no higher than 4 inches above the seedlings. The plants will need about 12 to 16 hours of light daily. Avoid leaving the light on all the time as many plants require a dark period for proper development. Also, keep in mind that seedlings are susceptible to drying out, so check them often to see whether they need water.

So when is it time to start seeds indoors? Well, that depends on the plant. Check the seed packet to find out the number of weeks that
are needed from sowing to transplanting outdoors. The packet will also have instructions on proper planting depth. For more information, take a look at the ISU Extension and Outreach publication, Starting Garden Transplants at Home.

**Crop Advantage Meetings Focus on New Herbicide Trait Management and Market Outlook**  
*Joel De Jong, Field Agronomist*

The Annual ISU Extension and Outreach Crop Advantage Series is designed to provide the latest information to producers and helping them make profitable decisions for the upcoming growing season. Each location has a variety of topics, including crops, pests, soil fertility, and farm management. Locations and dates of Northwest Iowa sessions include Jan. 6 in Sheldon, Jan. 7 at Okoboji, Jan. 14 in Storm Lake, Jan. 27 at Le Mars, and Jan. 29 in Carroll.

Extension and Outreach Economist Chad Hart will address “The Highs and Lows of Crop Marketing” as a keynote address at Northwest Iowa conferences. Extension and Outreach Weed Specialist Bob Hartzler will discuss future management options and issues with new herbicide resistance traits. In addition, each location features a full agenda of workshops that attendees can choose from, developing a personalized meeting agenda. Program topics that focus on local needs and production issues are selected by the ISU Extension and Outreach field agronomists for each meeting.

Each year I hear from attendees that they wish there were more breakout sessions during the day. They are interested in many of the topics and can’t be at every workshop. The topics are in demand. It’s a great problem to have.

The Crop Advantage Series provides a statewide message on important issues yet retains local input on topics for that specific area. Crop and pest management issues are different for each area of the state and these meetings are tailored to fit the needs of producers in that area.

Launched in 2002, the meeting series has impressive attendance numbers. We’ve seen tremendous growth in attendance for the series. Response from producers has been very positive. In addition to receiving the latest research information from the university, the meetings have been a valuable way for producers to provide input back to ISU researchers and specialists on what their needs are. I also find it to be a great opportunity to talk with crop producers and agronomists from around northwest Iowa at each of these sessions about how the season affected them, and what issues of concern they have for the next year.

Each of the meetings is approved for Certified Crop Adviser continuing education credits. Every location also offers the opportunity for private pesticide applicators to receive continuing education credits, a kind of “value added” pesticide training day.

Early registration for each location is $50 and includes workshop materials, lunch, and refreshments. This year the registration cost includes the price of the Private Pesticide Continuing Education and Certified Crop Advisor credits. Registration less than one week prior or at the meeting increases to $60. Additional program details, registration forms and online registration is available at www.cropadvantage.org or from local ISU Extension and Outreach offices.

**Common Industry Audit**  
*Dave Stender, Swine Program Specialist*

Significant changes are coming for pork producers as animal well-being is a growing concern for the industry. To address the issue, the National Pork Board officially announced that a new common swine industry audit platform is available for pork producers, packers and processors. Audit programs were being initiated by several different packers and were duplicative, costly and inefficient.

The concept of a common audit was first introduced at the 2013 National Pork Industry Forum and reintroduced at the 2014 World Pork Expo in Des Moines, where a coalition of packers and pork
producers explained how the audit is a credible and affordable solution for improving animal well-being.

According to the Pork Board, the overarching goal of the common audit process is to provide consumers greater assurance of the care taken by farmers and pork processors to improve animal well-being and food safety. The audit tool builds on the existing Pork Quality Assurance® Plus (PQA Plus®) program and expands it to serve as a single, common audit platform for the pork industry.

To help avoid duplicative, costly and inefficient audit programs that are commonplace in some countries, this new tool is designed to:

- Meet individual company and customer needs.
- Be focused on outcome-based criteria that measure and improve animal welfare.
- Provide clarity to producers about audit standards and expectations.
- Minimize duplication and prevent over-sampling.
- Ensure greater integrity of the audit process through consistent application.
- Provide an objective, science-based platform to facilitate continuous improvement in animal care.

Producers will continue to use PQA Plus to help them prepare for the audit, although more information will be required to complete the common audit. Some items not currently in PQA Plus include lameness, lesions, tail biting, hernias, written standard operating procedures for animal handling, piglet processing, daily observation, caretaker training, biosecurity, rodent control and treatment management.

Swine producers will be able to get more information at the annual swine regional meetings. In northwest Iowa the locations include Northwest Iowa Community College, Sheldon, Building A, Room 119 on Feb. 23 and at the extension office in Carroll on Feb 24. Both meetings run from 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. PQA Plus training will be available in the morning at both locations.
IT IS NOT TOO LATE TO SIGN UP FOR THE CROP ADVANTAGE SERIES

Le Mars January 27, 2015

$50 early registration—$60 after midnight, January 20 or at the door

Crop Advantage brings the latest crop production information from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach in Le Mars on January 27, 2015. Registration includes lunch, refreshments, a copy of the proceedings booklet, private pesticide applicator recertification and CCA credits.

REMAINING PRIVATE PESTICIDE TRAININGS

February 5, 2015 - 9:30 AM, Hinton and 1:30 PM, Remsen
March 3, 2015—7:00 PM
Plymouth County Extension Office, Le Mars

PRIVATE PESTICIDE TESTING DATE IN LE MARS

The IDALS test is offered from 10 AM to 2:00 PM on February 25 at the Le Mars Convention Center

CONFINEMENT MANURE CERTIFICATION

February 17, 2015 - 1:30 & 6:30PM
Plymouth County Extension and Outreach Office, Le Mars

COMMERCIAL MANURE CERTIFICATION RE-SHOW

February 24, 2015 - 9am-Noon
Plymouth County Extension and Outreach Office, LeMars