

## Starting Your Own Transplants

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

One of the ways that gardeners deal with winter weather and spring fever is to start their own transplants for vegetables and bedding plants (flowers). The action of getting to plant something and seeing new green foliage in the depth of winter is therapeutic on many levels. But it takes some planning to make sure you wind up with the size of transplant that you need at the time of year that you should be planting them!

Before you buy one package of seed or one pot or one bag of potting soil you need to get your planting and transplanting calendar/plan together! This is definitely a case where you start at the end and work your way back to the beginning! Various garden and flower plants have an optimal time for transplanting outdoors and each species of plant has varying times it takes to germinate and grow to transplantable size. Some species are ready to transplant in four weeks or less and others will take twelve weeks or more!

Let's take one of the most popular vegetable plants - tomatoes. I recommend transplanting tomatoes on Mother's Day weekend. This is late enough into spring that the soils have had a chance to warm and we are normally past any chance of frost. Tomatoes, from seeding until you have a nice size transplantable plant, takes about six weeks. If you back off six weeks from Mother's Day weekend (May 9<sup>th</sup>) you're going to be seeding your tomatoes the end of March, not now. We transplant peppers the same time as tomatoes, but since they take about eight weeks to reach proper size we're going to seed them about March 13<sup>th</sup>.

Here we are the start of February. If you wanted to start onions or shallots from seed, you need to start them now as it takes about six to eight weeks to get them up to size. In fact you could have started them in mid January, onions are one of our earliest plants to start from seed. We are right on target for starting lettuce transplants or any of the cole crops (cabbage, broccoli, or cauliflower.) I do have a couple of charts at the Extension Office that show how long it takes to get plants from seed to proper transplanting size and another chart that talks about when to plant common Kansas vegetable crops.

Once you have your timeline together then you can get your seed starting supplies. You never want to use soil to start your transplants. It's a recipe for disaster and root rot! Use a soil less potting mix. Get seed starter flats that have anywhere from 18 to 36 cells per tray. I prefer 18 to 24 per tray as it gives you more root area. Fill them with the potting mix, firm them up and then carefully plant your seeds. I use a pencil to make a little hole about a quarter inch deep, place a seed in and firm the mix over the top. Once you have everything planted, carefully water the tray down. I like to place some food grade plastic wrap loosely over the top to keep the cells from drying out too fast. Once most of the seeds have germinated you can remove this plastic wrap.

The other issue that most home gardeners run into is that they do not provide adequate light for these young plants. Unless you have a greenhouse you will not have adequate light to keep the plants from etiolating, or growing tall and spindly. If you are going to have good seedlings you need to have some form of fluorescent or LED lights sitting just a few inches (less than two) from the tops of the plants. A bright windowsill just won't cut it! If you need plans for some simple light frames or any other items I mentioned, please contact me at the Extension Office, 785-238-4161 or cotte@ksu.edu.