

Starting with Seed

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

With the start of the gardening season still a couple months away, spring fever is sure to get cranked up in a lot of gardeners between now and then. One way to deal with this affliction is to start your own garden transplants in your house so when the proper time arrives, you are ready to get your transplants in the ground. Additionally, you can shop the garden catalogs and get just the cultivars that you want for your tomatoes, peppers or whatever you want to grow instead of only what you can get from the nursery, garden center or wherever you find vegetable or flower transplants each spring. This activity is not without potential pitfalls however. The two most common problems are insufficient light and improper timing. Let's dive into both of these in more detail.

Timing of the planting date for your transplants is a multiple step process. The first step is knowing when is the right time to be transplanting your plants outside. Next you need to know how long it takes for the seeds you plant to get to a proper size for transplanting. Some vegetables can go from seeding to transplantable size in four weeks or less. For others it will take eight weeks. Some flower varieties can take twelve weeks or more. You have to start with when is the right time to transplant this specific crop in the garden. Then work backwards from there based on how long it takes the seeds to germinate and grow to know when to plant inside.

Let's take the ever popular tomato. Tomatoes take about six weeks from seed to transplant. Recommended planting date, outside, is about May 10th. Work all of these data into the formula and we see that tomato seeds should be planted about the last week of March. Cabbage is often transplanted from late March into mid April. It takes eight weeks to get from cabbage seed to transplants so you want to plant your cabbage seed from the end of January to the middle of February. Fortunately, for the most common vegetable and flower species I've done all those calculations for you and put it in a handy little chart. If you want a copy of it, contact the Extension Office at 785-238-4161 or stop by 119 East 9th Street in Junction City to pick one up.

Too many times, gardeners start plants and figure that if they put them in a sunny window there'll be plenty of light. Truth of the matter is that even bright windows, unless you have a greenhouse, aren't bright enough. The plants respond to these insufficient light situations by trying to grow up to the light source and the next thing you know you are still two weeks before tomato planting time and you have a skinny tomato plant 18 inches tall!

If you are serious about starting plants inside you need two to three twin bulb 48" fluorescent or LED light fixtures. Light intensity is far more crucial than wavelength of light. When starting transplants you don't need the fancy bulbs intended for growing plants, you just need light intensity. The next step is to keep these lights close to the top of the plants. I have a wooden frame with three twin bulb LED four foot lights. I have them on lightweight chains and keep the lights only an inch or two away from the top leaves, slowly raising them as the plants grow. There are lots of plans out there for wooden frames or PVC pipe frames. Ask me for details on any of them.

The last thing that needs to be mentioned is what you start the seeds in. Do not use garden soil. Good old dirt is a recipe for disaster. Any good soil less potting mix will work fine. You'll need to water every few days, maybe daily once they get some size, but you'll have better transplants and easier transplanting by using potting mix. Starting your own transplants is fun and helps keep spring fever at bay, just be sure to do it right!