Starting Seeds

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Some seeds do better if sewn directly in the garden. Many other plants that transplant well can be started ahead of the season for earlier flowers and vegetables. Starting plants from seed is a useful and satisfying method of producing plants economically and in numbers that you might not ordinarily purchase. An additional benefit is growing special varieties, including heirlooms that are particularly adapted to your gardening environment or are not readily available.

But before you set out to grow your own plants, you should determine where they will be placed in the garden and roughly how many plants you will need. If you are not careful, you may produce more plants than you can use or even give away.

Starting seeds indoors ahead of the season will produce earlier flowers and vegetables. Earlier vegetable harvests (especially tomatoes) avoid plant pest infestations that increase as the season progresses.

Many types of seed-starting trays and pots are available at nurseries and feed stores or by mail-order. You can use most any type of container to start seed or to transplant seedlings into. Be sure to provide drainage by making holes in the bottom of any containers that would hold water.

Plants are started roughly six to eight weeks before the last frost date. The overall range of setback time from the planting out date is four to ten weeks. It depends on species of plant that you are growing.

In Tallahassee the average date of last frost is about March twentieth. Six to eight weeks earlier would mean starting seeds in flats or packs about January fifteenth or twentieth. At planting time, if the weather forecast is too cold to set the plants out, it will not stress plants if they spend another week or so inside. If they do start to get pot bound, they can always be transplanted to a slightly larger pot.

Select a sterile potting soil that is especially designed for seed-starting. Ask at your local nursery. The cost is minimal and will help assure success. Contaminated soils may lead to the early loss of seedlings. Cover the seeds to the depth recommended on the seed packet. Water seedlings by spraying with a fine mist from a spray bottle or hose mister. Use a water soluble fertilizer at half the strength recommended for house plants. Keep the soil damp but not soggy.

Plants can be grown indoors under fluorescent lights that are placed a few inches above the surface of the soil. Seedlings become “leggy” if they do not receive enough light. Growing
temperatures should be in the range of 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Try to keep night-time temperatures above fifty degrees; whether indoors, in a cold-frame, or in a greenhouse.

If seeds are sewn in flats, transplant them to individual pots when they develop their second set of true leaves. Carefully separate the roots of the transplant from the other plants. Poke a finger-hole to receive the transplant in the middle a pot containing potting-mix. An alternative is to sew only two seeds in individual small pots or cells; then thin to one plant per pot when two sets of true leaves develop.

“Harden” plants by exposing them to mild outdoor conditions during the day for about a week before setting them out to their assigned spot in the garden. For plants that cannot stand a light frost or like a little warmer weather, you should wait until the first few weeks in April before planting them in the open garden.

Texas A&M University has a good website with more information seed-starting: http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/extension/newsletters/hortupdate/jan02/art5jan.html