

## Starting Seeds

January may not be a good “gardening month” in many people’s minds but it is a great time to start vegetable and flower seeds indoors. Seeding plants gives gardeners the opportunity to produce quality plants, at a lower price than buying established plants in the spring.

- **Quality Seed:** Start with fresh seed using varieties recommended for your area. Obtain seed from a reputable source like local garden stores or seed catalogs. Make sure to check the package date to see if it was packaged for the current year. On our website, you can find recommended varieties and specific crop information. It is always important to know the major pests and diseases that may affect your crop before you begin planning or planting your garden so you can make the correct choices to begin rather than wishing you had selected a disease resistant variety in July when the plant is already afflicted.

<https://www.shawnee.k-state.edu/lawn-garden/gardenerresources.html>

- **Date to Seed:** Use your Kansas Garden Guide (available through the above link) to determine transplant dates. From the transplant date count backwards (weeks from seeding to transplant on the seed package) to determine your seeding date.

- **Proper Media:** Don’t use regular potting soil or garden soil to sow seeds. These can be too heavy for small seeds and garden soil may contain diseases that immature seedlings are susceptible. Garden stores sell mixes specifically for starting seeds that will result in optimal germination.

- **Moisture:** Once seeds are planted the soil shouldn’t be allowed to dry. Keep soil moist (but not water logged) with a spray bottle and plastic cover over the container. The cover can be the clear plastic lids sold for seed trays or a piece of clear plastic. This layer is intended to keep heat and moisture in but needs to be suspended 2-3 inches above the soil to allow seedlings to push through the soil without further barrier. Remove the plastic once the plant germinates but keep the soil moist up until transplant.

- **Light:** Pay attention to the germination needs for each plant. Some will need to germinate in the dark, but all seedlings will need light once they emerge. Newly emerged seedling left in darkness, even briefly, will continue to stretch until they run out of energy and die.

- **Temperature:** Some plants require a higher temperature for germination than we typically have in our homes. You may try to find the warmest spot in your home (the top of the fridge or the top of the dryer on laundry day) or purchase a heated germination mat. Once germination occurs, most plants can be moved to cooler areas. Pay close attention to your soil moisture in high heat areas.

- **Touch:** Don’t just sing to your plants; touch them! Gently brushing your hands over your plants will make them stronger. “Brush” them with 20 strokes a day to get stockier plants. Keep in mind that not even touch will make up for inadequate light or overcrowding—both result in thin stems and overall weak plants.

- **Hardening Off:** Before you transplant your seedlings outside, make sure you harden them off. This means you begin gradually exposing the seedlings to outside conditions. Begin setting your seedlings outside about two weeks before transplant. The first day only leave them out for an hour or two, but as the days pass gradually increase their time outside. This will minimize seedling death as they are exposed to harsher conditions.