

Starting Seeds Indoors

In many parts of the country, vegetable and flower seeds can be successfully planted directly into the garden. But in the Washington area, the growing season is too short to allow this. Cool spring soil temperatures and cool weather prevent seeds from germinating or kill young seedlings. If you wait until the weather warms, the plants get off to a late start and don't get a chance to bear a full crop or to put on a full floral display.

You can buy your vegetables and flowers as starter plants once the weather warms, or you can start your own seed indoors. The first choice is best for beginning gardeners or those who are working on a small scale. Starting from seed is easy, is cheaper per plant and allows a greater variety of choice among plants and varieties than buying plants.

What You'll Need:

A Sunny Window - Plants like a southern exposure. If you don't have a window that will do, consider investing in some cool-white fluorescent bulbs.

Containers - Try all kinds to see what works for you. Make sure they are clean and have good drainage. If you are using a fiber or peat pot, soak it well before adding soil. Dry fiber pots draw moisture away from the soil.

Seeds - You'll get the best results if you purchase seeds, packaged for the upcoming growing season.

Growing Medium - Nothing beats a good commercial medium because it is sterile and free of unwanted weed seeds.

Sowing Seeds

Fill pots or flats to within 1/4 inch of the top with your potting mixture and level the surface. It's a good idea to water the soil and allow it to drain thoroughly before sowing the seeds. Make a hole for each seed with your finger or a pencil. Keep in mind that most seeds need to be planted four times as deep as the seed is wide. If your seeds are very fine, cover them with a fine layer of soil.

Moisture and Humidity - Your planting medium should be kept evenly moist, but not soaking wet. Too much moisture will cause the seeds to rot. Use a fine sprayer to water newly planted seeds and tiny seedlings or, if possible, water from the bottom. If you can, slip your pots and flats into plastic bags to keep the humidity and moisture even and reduce the frequency of watering.

Light - Some seeds require light to germinate while others prefer total darkness. Your seed packet should tell you what your seed's requirements are. Once germinated, all seedlings need light to develop into strong, healthy plants. Supplement the natural light with fluorescent bulbs if necessary.

Seedling Care - The care you give your seedlings in the weeks following germination is critical. Keep it moist, but not dripping. Small pots and flats dry out quickly, so check it often. If your seedlings are growing in a windowsill, turn often to encourage straight stems.

WASHINGTON, DC
4200 Wisconsin Ave, NW
at Van Ness St

www.johnsonsfloorists.com
KENSINGTON, MD
10313 Kensington Pkwy
next to the Post Office

OLNEY, MD
5011 Olney-Laytonsville Rd
Rt 108 and Zion Rd



Starting Seeds Indoors

The first two leaves you will see on the plant are not true leaves, but food storage cells called cotyledons. Once the first true leaves have developed, it's time to start fertilizing. Choose a good liquid organic fertilizer and use a weak solution once a week.

Hardening Off

A week before transplanting your seedlings outdoors, start to harden them off. This acclimates the soft and tender plants, which have been protected from wind, cool temperatures, and strong sun, to their new environment. Move the plants to a shady outdoor area at first, and bring them indoors for the night if night temperatures are cold. Each day, move them out into the sun for a few hours, increasing the time spent in the sun each day. Keep them well watered during this period, and don't place them directly on the ground if slugs are a problem. Monitor them closely for insect damage since tender young seedlings are a delicacy for insects.

Transplanting

Don't be in a rush to set your plants in the garden. If they won't withstand frost, be sure all danger of frost has passed (usually mid-April to mid-May in the Washington metropolitan area) before setting them out. Plan the garden in advance. Consider companion planting and plant sizes. Make sure your tall plants won't shade low growing neighbors.

Water the ground outside and the seedlings thoroughly before transplanting. This helps prevent transplant shock. It's preferable to transplant on a cloudy day so strong sun won't wilt your seedlings. Dig a hole about twice the size of the root ball and set the transplant into the hole so the root ball will be covered by 1/4 inch of soil. Press the soil firmly around the roots. A small depression around the plant stem will help trap moisture. Water immediately after transplanting and every day for the first week. Be sure to water deeply so your plants won't develop shallow roots.

WASHINGTON, DC
4200 Wisconsin Ave, NW
at Van Ness St

www.johnsonsfloorists.com
KENSINGTON, MD
10313 Kensington Pkwy
next to the Post Office

OLNEY, MD
5011 Olney-Laytonsville Rd
Rt 108 and Zion Rd

