

Confessions of a Lazy Gardener

Issue #3: Starting Seeds

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Well, it's time to order seeds already, and even the Lazy Gardeners among us are tempted to grow our own. While it's much easier to buy plants at the garden stores or the MWGCM Plant Sale, there are advantages to starting some things from seed:



- Variety. You can find things in seed catalogs that might not show up at your local garden center. The peppers that my husband Phil grows come to mind. When was the last time you saw a pack of "Bulgarian Carrot" or "Mirasol" peppers around town? Or "Biscayne" or "Italico"? And some things like Ageratum "Blue Horizon" are spotty -- you might find them and you might not, depending on when and where you look. Or the Beacon impatiens series. The list goes on....
- Cost. This might be deceptive. It might not be all that much cheaper to start seeds, once you count the cost of the seeds, the starting mix, the electricity to run the heat and lights, etc. But it *seems* cheaper.
- The opportunity to get started a little early. Let's face it. By mid-March, we're ready to see some green stuff, even if it's down in the basement and not outdoors.

So, here are a few things that I've learned -- mostly the hard way -- about starting seeds.

1. Start with easy things. If something is listed as challenging to germinate in the seed catalog, I don't even bother! It's frustrating to spend \$3 (2000 price) for a packet of seeds and then have 0% germination -- or one sickly thing that might be a weed. And I know I won't go through a long series of complicated steps. So I stick to things like peppers, snapdragons, petunias, marigolds, ageratum, etc. *Salvia argentea* is a record-holder for me: so far I've had 100% germination for two years straight. (This can be a bad thing. *Salvia argentea* is a pretty big plant, and nobody really needs 15 of them. But I had 15, so I planted 15. They are quite ugly their second year.)
2. Start with clean containers. I just wash them in warm soapy water with a little bleach. It seems silly to wash something just to put dirt in it again, but it makes a noticeable difference in the damp-off prevention game. I haven't tried washing trays and cell-packs in the dishwasher -- not sure the dishwasher would ever be the same...or the containers.
3. Use sterilized starting mix or potting soil. I buy this. There are a few people (and you know who you are) who sterilize their own mix by heating it in their ovens, but I know I would never get it done. Plus, I've heard that there's a definite aroma when baking soil mixes. So I settle for one of the popular soilless seed starting mixes. I have a preference for something like Jiffy Mix, which has some nutrients added, but it's been harder to find around town recently. And I hate to shop, so I do the expedient thing, which is to buy whatever I can find at the store I happen to be in! I like the mixes that are not too coarse, especially for starting smaller seeds. And I avoid any mix that has those moisture-retaining beads. Too much moisture is more risky than not enough moisture.
4. Pay some attention to the temperature that seeds should be started at. But don't get too worked up about it for the easy seeds. Snapdragons, for instance, are supposed to prefer temperatures around 55-60 degrees for germination, but I have found that they start up just fine at 70-75. Maybe even a little better. Remember -- we're talking about the seeds that germinate



easily. If they were that picky about temperature, they would be in the "easy" category to start with.

5. Think about how many seedlings you might have if you get a good germination rate. Are you prepared to have 200 nicotiana sylvestris if all those tiny dust-like seeds come up? (And they will. Like grass.) If not, think about trying a few seeds and seeing how it goes. Or plan to bring a LOT of something to the MWGCM Plant Sale. Or plan to compost some of the extras if you can stand to. I can't stand to do that, which is why I have about 20 filipendula vulgaris in my border. (Anybody need any? Free to a good home.)
6. Easy on the fertilizer. I don't use much fertilizer on my seedlings. Since I'm not sure what I'm doing, I tend to burn the plants when I fertilize, and most of the easy stuff seems to do fine without it.
7. Keep the lights close. Most of these things need a LOT of light, so keep the shop lights right on top of them. I am too lazy to put the lights on a timer, so they are on 24 hours/day. Some people say seedlings do better on a timed cycle, but full-time lights seem fine for my purposes. The basement glows eerily in the pre-dawn hours.
8. Don't over-water. It's amazing what kind of drought seedlings can recover from, although I don't recommend putting them to the test. But careful watering will again reduce the risk of damp-off, which can wipe out a lot of stuff in a hurry. I think it's better to run slightly on the dry side, although I expect I could get an argument on that.
9. Water from the bottom. Unless you're very good, it's hard to pour water on the top of a tray of small seedlings without flooding them out. I keep the seedling containers in larger 10x20 trays without holes in the bottom, and then just pour water in the larger tray. You need to watch to make sure the seedling packs don't end up standing in water too long, of course.
10. Don't cave in to damping off. Fungicides can help. I can't ever remember the ones that the good gardeners use -- but I sprayed some Funginex around my germination table when I had a damp-off problem, and the damp-off did not spread further.
11. Use plastic covers to conserve moisture. It is possible -- but not necessarily recommended -- to leave your seedlings under clear plastic covers for 10 days while you go to Honolulu and bask on the beaches. You'll probably have pepper plants crowding up against the top of the covers when you get back, but you'll be very well-rested!

Happy Gardening! Spring is coming!