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Starting Seeds Indoors

As winter slowly turns towards spring, gardeners began getting anxious. For those who want to get an early start on their garden, starting seeds indoors is a perfect remedy for winter restlessness.

Vegetable seeds are probably the most common for starting indoors but gardeners can also start annuals and even perennials from seed.

Timing is critical for seeds. If started too early then the seedlings will outgrow their pots and become root-bound before they can be placed outside. The general rule is to start seeds 4 – 6 weeks before they can be transplanted outside. Cold season vegetables, such as salad greens, kale, spinach and broccoli, should be started first as they can tolerate early spring frosts. Similarly, annuals that prefer cool temperatures, such as pansies and snapdragons, can be started from seed in mid-winter.

Seeds should be started in a light, fast-draining, and sterilized medium, such as a commercial seedling mix rather than standard potting soil. Because the mix is sterilized it will help prevent the fungus that causes damping-off, a common cause of seedling death.

Proper lighting is essential. If seedlings aren't receiving enough light they will reach up for more light and become "leggy". With enough light the seedlings can grow stout and strong rather than thin and weak. It's best to use artificial lights designed for growing plants. Your seedlings should receive 14 hours of direct light a day – that's a lot of light!

As with all plants, correct watering is vital. The seedling mix should be kept consistently moist but must never be soggy and should never dry out. Watering correctly is an art! Water from below and allow the seedling mix to soak the water up like a sponge. If you're not able to check your seedlings during the day you might consider placing the seedlings on a bed of gravel and keeping the gravel moist. This will help prevent them from drying out. Just be sure to keep the water level below the level of the gravel – the pots should rest on the gravel, not in the water.

If you're new to starting plants from seeds it may take a few tries to get the knack of it. But that's the fun of gardening – getting your hands a bit dirty while learning something new about the edible plants we enjoy for food and the ornamental plants that make our world a bit more beautiful.

