



Living in the foothills...

Advice from Master Gardeners, Ray and Ruth Conner, Oakhurst, CA

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Using Cold Frames

Living in the foothills, between 2500 and 3500 feet brings many challenges to the home gardener. First our summer is shorter than that experienced in the Fresno area. We can have freezes and hailstorms into the first of June. There are about 100 days of summer before the first freeze in September.

The easier way to grow vegetables is to buy plants from the nursery in early June and plant them in the vegetable garden. However, if you want to try different varieties of vegetables found in seed catalogues there are other alternatives. Plants can be started indoors with a fluorescent lamp and seeds put in trays filled with seed starting material. These can then be transplanted when the weather is friendly and warmer weather has arrived.

Another method is using a cold frame. Basically, the cold frame is placed over a bed (we use a raised bed) and the seeds are planted in the soil in the frame. There is a plastic lid that can be shut or opened according to the temperature. When closed, the temperature stays warm even though the area outside of the frame is cold. It can get as low as 20 degrees outside and the plants will survive inside of the box. However, the box needs to be opened during the warmth of the day as the radiant heat can cook the plants. This can be done manually with blocks or automatically with a temperature controlled device that opens or closes the frame automatically. These are self-controlled and do not need electricity to operate them.

The photo on the right shows our cold frame. Notice in the photo that no heating devices are used to control the temperature. This system works well even though there may be snow on the ground and on the lids. With this technique, plants can be started in April, and will be doing great by June when the lids can be left off as the weather permits. We have started romaine lettuce and root vegetables in late August to have fresh things growing into the fall and winter. Lettuce and spinach can be cut as needed and will produce until the end of the year.



Use of a cold frame for growing vegetables—Photo by Ray Conner.