

Starting Seeds to Early

01.6.2017

Q: I am new to Redding and I am not sure when I should be starting seeds indoors for transplanting outdoors. When can I plant my summer vegetable plants outdoors safely?

A: In the Redding area the average date for our last killing frost is mid- April, this date can be even later if you live in the higher elevations. It is tempting to be thinking about starting seed now especially when we have sunny weather in the 60's. However, January is far too early to start most seeds and sowing seeds too early is just as bad, maybe worse, than starting them too late. You waste your time and money when you start seeds to early. Here are some of the pitfalls of planting seeds too early.

First there is too little light at this time of year – If you rely on a sunny windowsill to start your seeds, you want to wait a little longer to start seed sowing. Most plants need at least 10 hours of light in order to grow well, and in January, much of the Northern Hemisphere receives less than that. We are getting about 9.5 hours of light here in Redding in mid-January. And if we have overcast or rainy days the amount of quality light is further shortened. Too little light results in leggy, spindly seedlings, which will never make good garden plants.

If you are a grow-light gardener, lack of light isn't a problem; as long as the light bulbs are hanging only about 3 inches above the plants. The adequate light will eliminate the leggy factor and help produce sturdy, well branched seedlings. But, starting your seeds too soon is still a problem. How? Seeds sown too early will result in bigger plants which then need to be potted up into bigger containers which quickly take over your seed starting area/house and cost you more money is potting soil, organic fertilizer and pots. Plus, you'll need to be on top of watering, as those sizeable seedlings will need more frequent irrigation.

Those big plants can bolt, and if you have big plants you are holding indoors in bigger pots, they can act like they've reached maturity and start producing flowers and fruits while still inside your house. In the case of tomatoes, you may think this gives you an awesome head start to a homegrown harvest, but this is not the case. Tomato plants grow and yield best when they are transplanted before they begin to flower. Transplanting outdoors 6 to 9 weeks from sowing seed, depending on growing temperatures, usually give plants the best start. I start my tomatoes in late

February for mid-April transplanting. Bolting can also adversely affect other types of seedlings like broccoli, lettuce, cabbage, cauliflower, squash, cucumbers, and pumpkins. This will reduce or eliminate your harvest, not hasten it.

Another problem with holding seedlings indoors too long is that you end up fighting pest and disease problems that you may not have had if you transplanted outdoors sooner.

So how do you know when should you start your vegetable, herb and flower seeds? Refer to the seed packet, catalogue or seed company website. They should offer accurate advice on when to start seeds indoors for each type of plant and then just count back the number of weeks from your area's date of last killing frost. For the Redding area you can refer to the Vegetable Planting Schedule on the Shasta College's website

http://ucanr.edu/sites/Shasta_College_Master_Gardener/files/175380.pdf for the best dates for planting most of the common vegetables.

You can also find many seed starting calculators online. Below is an example of one that works well. Just enter your last average frost date and it will tell you when to sow seed indoors. <http://awaytogarden.com/when-to-start-seeds-calculator/>