

## Here's How, When To Plant Tomato Seedlings Indoors For Later Outdoor Transplant

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Feb. 21, 2020



Start tomato seeds six to eight weeks before the date of the last killing frost. (Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

**Q:** I would like to start tomato plants indoors for transplanting out into the garden later. I have not started the seed yet. Am I too late getting started?

**A:** You still have time to plant seed indoors even if you live in the Redding area. Depending on the growing conditions of your indoor space, you want to start tomato seeds six to eight weeks before the date of the last killing frost. The average date for our last killing frost is mid-April; at higher elevations it can be as late as the first of June. With this in mind you can start seed as late as March 1, and have plants ready to go in the garden as soon as the danger of frost has past.

It's tempting to start planting a garden now, especially when we have sunny weather with temperatures in the high 60s. However, February is far too early to plant most summer vegetables outdoors, as soil temperatures are still much too cold and we still may get hard frosts.



Earlier planting leads to better harvests only when tomato seedlings have consistently, near-perfect growing conditions. (AP Photo/Lee Reich) (Photo: Lee Reich / AP)

If you don't want to wait until mid-April to set out frost-tender plants like tomatoes, make a plan on how you are going to protect them on the cold nights.

To start seeds indoors, you can use natural light if you have a sunny windowsill. Most plants need at least 10 hours of light in order to grow well, and we are currently getting about 10.5 hours of daylight. If we have overcast or rainy days, the amount of quality light is 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 lights are hanging only about three inches above the plants. The adequate light will eliminate the leggy factor and help produce sturdy, well branched seedlings.

Correct soil temperature is important when starting seed. Tomato seeds need soil temperatures in the mid-70s to sprout quickly. If you let your house get into the 60s, you may need a heating mat or grow mat to keep your soil warm enough for the seeds to germinate.

The [Sacramento Master Gardeners have a great chart for determining the correct soil temperatures for germination of seed.](#)

To find out when to start other vegetable, herb or flower seeds, refer to the seed packet, catalogue or seed company website. Many offer accurate advice as to the number of weeks in advance to start seeds

indoors. Once you have this information, just count back the number of weeks from your areas date of last killing frost.

For the Redding area, refer to the [Vegetable Planting Schedule on the Shasta County Extension Master Gardener website for the best dates for planting common vegetables indoors and outside.](#)

*The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email [mastergardener@shastacollege.edu](mailto:mastergardener@shastacollege.edu). The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.*