

NEWS RELEASE

Week of February 18, 2008

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Seed Starting

Springtime is around the corner, and some gardeners like to get an early start by starting seeds indoors. Seeds should be started 4-6 weeks before planting time. In Stanislaus County, there is a 10% chance of frost after March 21st. Use this date as a guideline to determine when to plant your seeds.

To start seeds, you'll need sterile containers and planting medium. Containers should be new or sterilized with 1 part bleach to 10 parts hot water. Ensure containers have several holes in the bottom for good drainage. The planting medium should be labeled for use in containers. Moisten soil until it resembles a well-wrung sponge before adding it to containers. Using garden soil to grow seedlings is not advisable, as it may have soil-borne diseases such as damping off.

Seeds need a warm place to grow and a light source to support growth. Light should be bright, such as a south facing window. If you do not have enough light indoors, use two 40-watt light bulbs. Place them about 6 inches above the containers, and keep the lights on for 14-16 hours per day. As the seedlings grow, monitor them to ensure they do not get too close to the lights, as leaf burn can happen if plants and bulbs come into contact. Unfortunately, fluorescent lights do not provide all light wavelengths needed by plants. Plants will need some exposure to infrared light through a window or incandescent light bulb. Using grow lights is one way to give your plants all the necessary wavelengths for growth, however it can be costly.

Follow instructions on your seed packets to ensure proper planting depth. Seeds buried too deeply may sprout, but without enough resources to break through the top of the soil, will die. For tiny seeds, place on top of soil and sprinkle a small amount of soil over the top to cover. Label your plants, as many seedlings look alike.

Water seeds carefully, as splashing can wash them out of the container. Keep soil moist, but not soggy. If desired, use a houseplant fertilizer mixed in your water, at ½ the recommended strength. Wait a few days until your seedlings have emerged to fertilize, then fertilize at 2 week intervals with recommended strength on label. Do not over-fertilize, as young seedlings can be easily damaged.

After seedlings have reached 6-8 inches tall, they can be moved outdoors to be "hardened off." This process helps seedlings acclimate to outdoor temperatures. Place plants outside in a protected location for a few hours each day until they become used to ambient air temperatures.

Remove seedlings from their containers gently and plant them directly into the ground, or an outdoor container. Although the chance of frost is less than 10% after March 21st, cool

temperatures and rain can cause damage and/or slow growth. Use row covers to protect seedlings from wind and promote warmer daytime temperatures. Before completely removing protective coverings, seedlings will once again need to be “hardened off” by temporarily exposing them to full sunlight.