

Organizing Seeds at Home

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The seeds have arrived, delightful packets with colorful pictures and precise instructions on how to get the most out of their bounty and beauty. Some will feed our household and present opportunities to create tasty gifts for friends, and others will add eye candy wherever they're planted. I've selected an interesting mix of annuals this year with an eye towards rebuilding the soil, attracting beneficial insects, and making the most out of the gardening time that I have. Starting seeds can be a fun way of exploring new plants that you might not see in a nursery, but sometimes it's hard to organize the process. Here are some tips on where to start!

Organization

I buy my seeds from a number of online and catalog sources and even pick up a few packets from the nursery or grocery store racks! It's difficult to say no to something that looks so pretty when there's snow on the ground or rain coming down! The hope of summer color or vegetables is just too strong!

For those of you who have bought seeds with the best of intentions only to realize that the days have slipped away without putting them in soil, know that you are not alone! I too am guilty of this, and a few years ago, I decided to get organized so that I didn't fall into that trap again. Where to start? The seeds themselves!

I first divide the categories of seeds – vegetables, herbs, greens, annual flowers, etc. I then pick a category and begin reading the instructions. Will they do better going right into their final garden home or can they be started inside? How early before the final frost date should they be started? What special requirements for growing do they have?

Once the seeds are divided up by instructions, I start a list. For example, each type of vegetable that will be started in the garden goes in one column, the ones that need 6 weeks of start time in another, fall vegetables in yet another and so on. Tomatoes, a big favorite in our house, are in a class by themselves!

I have an old loaf-style Tupperware container with alphabetical dividers inside, the kind you use for index cards. Once the seeds are listed, I file them alphabetically in the dividers so that I can find the seeds easily. It would work just as well, though, to rubber band together a category of seeds with a note attached at the top about which grouping that is.

I now know what needs to start when, like what I need to start at the end of February, or middle of March, or wait for the planting bed outside to be ready and warmed by the spring sun. I post a note to my calendar on when I need to start the first batch of seeds. On to getting my seed starting place in order!

A Place for It All

Many people start seeds at home, ranging in complexity from a few pots on a sunny windowsill to an elaborate heated set-up in a greenhouse. I have an extra bathroom that offers some good space, warmth and power, so I take a blended approach. I have lots of seed starting trays and a tall vertical open metal shelving unit to hold them.

The shelving unit itself came from a big box store and features open metal shelves that can be adjusted for height and wheels that are installed at the bottoms of the legs. It's open with plenty of places to hang things, and it can be moved/rolled easily. Because we have a few of these around our house, it has more shelves attached than just one set, which increases the growing area.

The next thing to consider is light. I bought inexpensive grow lights, the kind that look like fluorescent strips that hang on chains. Grow light bulbs emit a spectrum of light that plants need for photosynthesis, but cool white light bulbs can work equally well. I suspend the lights from the bottoms of the shelves, and I adjust the length of chain so that I can fit the seed starter trays underneath with a little room to grow.

As a safety step, I put the lights on a surge protector bar that's connected to a plug-in timer. I can then adjust the length of time that the plants have light, based on where they are in their growing process. Between the timer and the height, I can adjust the light as the plants grow.

Starting the Seeds

I try to batch my seeds so that I am filling a whole seed starter tray at one time, even if it is with different types of plants. I set up the seed starter tray according to its instructions, which sometimes means getting the planting medium wet the day before so that it has a chance to fully hydrate. Preparing individual pots offers more flexibility but takes more space. It helps to set any tray on the shelf before you load it with water to avoid a mess while moving it!

Then plant away! Make sure to note what is going where in the tray. I mark one end of the tray with an 'X' and then draw a map, since it's hard to insert tags and then put the lid on the tray. I can hang the piece of paper with the map from the end of the shelf for easy reference. I add the date I planted the seeds to the map too, so that I can check the germination and ready-to-plant times against the packets.

Do you have seeds left? Save them in their original packet! While each passing year will bring a lower germination rate, some seeds will remain viable for years to come. And if you empty the packet, don't throw it away yet! Save it so that you can refer back to it as the plant grows.

Finally, consider planting some extra seeds this year! Later in the year, you'll hear more about Plant a Row for the Hungry, or you can donate the proceeds to a local food bank or church that serves meals. If you have the space to grow more than you need, there are plenty of places that will welcome your fresh donations! Enjoy those seeds, whatever you may plant!

Tomorrow, Saturday, February 20th, UCCE Master Gardeners will present a class on Spring and Summer Vegetable Gardening. The class starts at 9 a.m. and will be held in Government Building "C" located at 2850 Fairlane Ct. in Placerville. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling 530-621-5512. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville.