Starting Seeds Indoors

With the March time change coming soon, spring is on the way. Hopefully the beginning of springs keeps the much needed moisture and cool temperatures that ween to kick off the 2021 growing season in the right direction.

As clocks spring forward it is time to start thinking about starting vegetable plants indoors.

You can always purchase vegetable starts from a nursery later in the spring so why spend the time and energy doing it at home?

Like anything else there are both advantages and disadvantages of purchasing plant stars from a nursery. The advantages to purchasing plants are that you don’t have to the start the plants yourself, there is no need to dedicate the sunny window sill to the project for two months and the plants you can buy are usually healthy.

The disadvantages are tat you are limited to the varieties the nursery has available, the plants can sometimes be costly and there is no guarantee that the plants from the nursery are pest and disease free.

One of the greatest advantages to starting your own plants is being able to customize the timing of planting and varieties planted to your own garden situation.

If you are planting in a greenhouse or high tunnel you will be able to start your seeds earlier than if you were planting outside after the last frost date.

There are different factors that will determine the timing of starting seeds. The biggest factor is the Average last Frost Date.

In Dove Creek our average last frost date is June 15th. In Rico is July 1st. Although our last frost date is late, we can usually plant by the end of May and be pretty confident.

I like to plant my tomatoes and peppers in my unheated greenhouse on Memorial Weekend if things seem right. If there is snow on the ground I of course would hold off.

The next factor is the type of crop. It is usually recommended that seeds be started 4 to 8 weeks before the last frost depending on the crop.

If you are using a greenhouse or other season extension method the last frost date will be earlier. Different crops are started indoors for different reasons.

For example a tomato plant is started indoors because our growing season is not long enough to get production off of a plant started from seed outside unprotected.

A broccoli plant on the other hand is started indoors to give the plant a chance to mature and produce before the summer temperatures get too hot.

Starting seeds is actually pretty easy.

You can use most containers as long as they have holes in the bottom to allow drainage. For some ideas and motivation there are many gardening groups on Facebook that can be fun to check out. You will find out pretty quickly that everyone does things differently and different methods work better for different people.

A factor to consider is how much you want to spend.   
You can purchase posts and trays or you can use things from around the house. I prefer to start seeds is a plug tray insert or peat pellets. These can purchased at most nurseries and have the capacity to start 60 to 70 plants in a standard seed flat tray. They don’t take up much room and a heating mat can be used under the tray to speed germination.

Seeds can be started in a variety of materials such as fine textured potting mixes or inert media such as “Coco Plugs”. New clean soil or media is recommended to make sure there are no pests or diseases present that can affect the success of the seedlings.

If an inert media is used the seedlings will require fertilization after they emerge and establish. This when they fully develop the first set of adult leaves. These can either be transplanted or fertilized through the foliage with a fish fertilizer solution in a spray bottle if transplanting into larger containers is delayed.

Once the soil or mix has been decided on, fill the containers that will be used with soil or mix. Ack the soil gently into the containers to ensure good seed to soil contact. Plant the chosen seeds as per the directions on the seed package.

I recommend planting 2 seeds per small container with the expectation that only 1 will germinate. Use a clean spray bottle to water. The soil must be kept moist but not wet.

A spray bottle works very well for this. A humidity dome or some plastic wrap can be used over the top of the tray to hold humidity. Leave the tray out of direct light until the seedling begin to emerge.

Once you see them coming up move the operation to a sunny south facing window and remove the humidity dome for better light exposure.

If both seeds in a container germinate save the healthiest of the two seedlings and pinch off the second.

Pulling the second seedling is not recommended because it could potentially damage the other seedling’s roots.

At this stage there are 2 things that can happen that are quite frustrating. The most common Is the seedlings get leggy is there is not enough light exposure, this is stressful as the seedling us using too much energy to reach for light. If this happens the seedlings, especially tomatoes, can be transplanted and buries deeply.

The best way to prevent this is a grow light. A simple florescent light works. I like to keep my 2 inches above the seedlings and get them under the light as soon as they come up.

In my opinion and experience a light is the best investment for starting seeds if you were to only buy one thing.

The second thing that can happen is damping off. This is caused by a fungus that rots the stem at the soil surface just after emergence.

Using clean and sanitized soil medium and supplies will take care of the damping off issues.

As the seedlings grow they must be moved to bigger containers so they will not get root bound. Keep an eye on the seedlings and care for them as they grow. About a week or two before planting them out they will need to be hardened off.

Take them outside during the day as long as the temperature is above 50 degrees and there are no strong winds. This will prepare the little guys for the rea world of cooler temperatures and breezes.

Once the seedlings have been hardened off they are ready to plant out and will be their way to supplying you with great produce.

The CSU Extension Cattle and Forage Grower Drought Edition has 2 more virtual sessions coming over the next 2 Tuesdays from 10:00 am until 11:30 am.

Email me at [Gus.Westerman@colostate.edu](mailto:Gus.Westerman@colostate.edu) to register for free. We are also holding viewing sessions at the Public Service Center!

**March 16th:** This webinar will cover grazing management ‘musts’ in drought on rangelands in western Colorado, and feature decision tools development by CSU Extension’s agriculture and business management team on strategic choices in drought. Speakers are Retta Bruegger and Jenny Beiermann of CSU Extension.

**March 23rd:** This meeting will feature speakers on forage options and considerations in drought, as well weed management in drought. Speakers are Gus Westerman and Robin Young of CSU Extension, and Dr. Kelcey Swyers, owner and operator of Grassland Nutrition Consulting.

*Information provided by CSUCE and Dolores County.*

For further information concerning these topics or any other subject, stop in or call Gus, Oma and Joey at the Colorado State University Dolores County Extension Office, 677-2283. Cooperative Extension programs are available to all without discrimination.