HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

STARTING TRANSPLANTS FOR SPRING GARDEN

Get a jump-start on your spring vegetable garden by starting seeds indoors. Just a few weeks of growing the young plants indoors will give you earlier yields on your vegetable crops. It will also extend the lives of the plants, giving you higher yields. When the weather warms up, move the small plants outside for an "instant" garden. Starting your vegetable plants indoors is easy. Just follow a few basic steps.

The first step is to plan your garden. Decide what vegetables you would like to grow and which varieties. Are these warm season vegetables that will do well in a spring Florida garden? Also, make sure that these plants will do well as transplants. Not all vegetables can be grown indoors as transplants. Some need to be sowed directly into the garden. Vegetables that do well as transplants include tomatoes, eggplant, and peppers. Beans, cucumbers, and squash do poorly as transplants.

The next step is to sow the seeds. A seedbox or flat is the most practical and easiest way for a home gardener to start a small number of plants. Any small, shallow, wooden or plastic box with drainage holes can be used as a seedbed. Typical dimensions are 3-5 inches deep, 12 inches wide, and 18 inches long, but any size will work. Just make sure it is not too large that it would be too heavy to move when the soil is moist. Small cracks in the bottom provide drainage. A newspaper may be placed in the bottom to prevent any soil coming through the drainage holes.

Use a ready prepared potting mix in the seedbox. Prepared potting mixes that already contain fertilizer are ideal. If your soil mixture does not contain fertilizer, stir in 1 to 2 tablespoons of a 6-8-8 fertilizer. Fill the container to within ½ inch of the top, making sure the soil is level and firm. Gently moisten the filled flat with water and let drain.

Now it is time to sow the seeds. For tiny seeds, spread them over the entire surface of the soil and press them gently into the soil with a board. There is no need to cover them, as they will still germinate. For larger seeds, make furrows (long trenches) in the seedbed ¼ inch deep and two inches apart. Place seeds in the furrows and cover them with soil. You do not have to worry about spacing the seeds evenly apart at this point. That detail is later in the process.

Locate the seedbox in a warm, sunny location and place newspaper or plastic material over the box until the seedlings begin to emerge from the soil. This creates a "greenhouse" for the seeds, keeping them warm. Don't let the soil dry out. If the surface of the soil becomes dry to the touch, gently sprinkle water on the soil, careful not to disturb the seeds. Also, make sure not to overwater the seeds. This may cause them to rot and die.

When the plants grow to be 2 inches tall, it is time to thin them. Thinning means to remove plants that are growing too close together. Plants should be 2-3 inches apart. Extra plants can be transplanted to another flat or container. This is also the time to begin acclimating the seedlings to direct sunlight and wind. Do this by gradually setting them outside. Increase the time the box has full sunlight each day until plants are fully acclimated (6 hours of sun).

Most vegetables are ready to be transplanted in the garden when they are 4-6 weeks old. Transplant only the best plants that are strong, vigorous and disease free. These plants will have a better chance of survival and will give you a jump-start on your spring garden.

Starting your seeds indoors allows you to avoid the cool weather, giving you an early start on your garden. Transplants can also give you earlier and higher yields and they allow you to choose the best plants for...
your garden, increasing the level of success for your garden. Just make sure the plants you grow for
transplants can be easily transplanted into the garden.

Information for this article was taken from the UF/IFAS publication "Starting the Garden with
Transplants". For a free copy of this publication or answers to other gardening questions, please contact
the Osceola County Master Gardeners on Mondays to Fridays from 10 am to 2 pm. Stop by or call them at
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Date: January 4th, 2004