



How to grow a whole garden from scratch

Seed Starting

There are no magical chemicals, no special ingredients, and no top-secret tricks known only to greenhouse growers. Starting plants from seed is something anyone can do with just a little basic know-how. But why bother when you can just buy transplants later? For one thing, you've got more choice of variety with seeds. For another, your plants will be ready whenever you want them. Plus, it's cheaper to start plants from seed, and you get the extra satisfaction of knowing you "gave birth" to the plant...a motherly-instinct kind of thing.

What you'll need

You could buy one of those expensive seed-propagation kits, but the truth is, all you really need is some light-weight seed-starting soil, a few containers with holes, and of course, seeds.

One good game plan is to go with a two-step system in which you start the seeds in one larger container and then transplant as many of the seedlings as you need into individual cell packs, peat pots, or other small pots.

Moisten the seed starting soil and fill your seed container of choice about two-thirds full. Margarine tubs with holes poked in the bottom for drainage work great.

Sprinkle seeds over the top of the moistened soil, then cover with a thin layer of more soil. Most seeds should be covered about two to three times as deep as their width. However, some seeds (like impatiens, nicotiana, ageratum, alyssum, snapdragons and lettuce) need light to germinate, so they don't need covered at all. Hold in moisture by lightly covering your seed containers with a sheet of plastic wrap. You may need to rewet the soil once or twice if it begins to dry out before the seeds are up. Besides moisture, your seeds need heat to germinate. Most seeds germinate best between 70 and 75 degrees. If your house is that warm, any table will work fine. Those who keep their houses cooler find their seeds germinate best atop a water heater, refrigerator or other heat-generating appliance. Next to a sunny window also might do the trick.

Once they're up...

Within a few days to a few weeks (depending on the type of plant), baby seedlings should be poking their heads out of the soil. Once the first pair of seed leaves has popped open, it's time to transplant your babies into their own homes.

You've got lots of choices here for transplant containers. Peat pots are popular, but you can make your own pots out of newspaper, use household containers like milk cartons or foam cups (with holes poked in the bottom) or recycled plastic cell packs like those greenhouse plants are sold in. If you reuse cell packs or other containers, be sure to soak them first for a few minutes in a 10 percent bleach solution (nine parts water to one part household bleach) to kill any disease organisms.

Fill your pots with a good quality moistened potting mix, and you're ready to transplant. Don't scrimp by using inexpensive potting soil (often too heavy) or by using garden soil (too heavy and disease-prone).

Use a pencil or other pointy object to free your seedlings from the soil and to drill planting holes in your potting mix, and always be sure to handle seedlings by the leaves, never the stem. If you clumsily tear a leaf, the seedling can grow a new one. But if you squish the stem, the plant will die.



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