Indoor Seed Starting Tips

Benefits of starting seeds indoors

Sowing seeds indoors allows you to get a jump on the growing season. If you start your vegetable seed planting at the right time for your area, you'll have strong, vigorous seedlings ready to go into the ground once the regular growing season begins. In areas with short growing seasons, this method is ideal.

Which seeds to start indoors

As a rule of thumb, these seeds do well when started indoors. Check your seed packet for instructions.

- Tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, and celery
- Greens like lettuce, kale, arugula (although they can be direct sowed as well)
- Brassicas (broccoli, cabbage, etc.)
- Onions
- Most flowers

Tips for starting seeds indoors

1. **Know when to start!** It all starts with the calendar. Read the packet for instructions. If you start them too early, they can grow too big and even potentially bolt. Plus, they may need to be repotted several times, can quickly take over your seed starting area/house, and cost you more money.
2. **Heating mats**. (optional) As long as germinating seed containers are kept away from a cool source, they should germinate in 7-15 days, depending on seed type. A heat mat set at 70 degrees will shorten germination times by days and contribute to a higher rate of germination.
3. **Adequate light/timer.** Once 90% or more of the seeds have their first set of leaves, they need light to grow. A plant light or a simple shop light with florescent bulbs will ensure your plants get the light they need. Consider adding a timer so the plants automatically get the appropriate amount of light and are allowed to rest at night.
4. Supplies.
    a. Containers. You can buy seed trays and cells or use yogurt containers, toilet paper rolls, or even egg cartons. Just make sure they have drainage holes.
    b. Seed-starting mix. For best results, use a plain, sterile, soilless potting or container mix. Beware of potting mixes that have moisture control additives.
    c. Plant identification tags or tape.
    d. Balanced liquid fertilizer.
    e. Other: fan (optional) and timer.

How to start seeds indoors

1. **Prepare containers.** Obtain supplies and set up your growing station. Make sure containers have been sterilized in a solution of one part bleach to nine parts water. Alternatively, Lysol can be used.

2. **Read seed packets.** Note the planting information for each type of seed and pay attention to planting depth.
3. **Pre-moisten the seed starting mix.** It should be moist but not soaking wet.
4. **Sow seeds.** Plant seeds at appropriate depth (typically twice the diameter of the seeds). Look at the germination percentage on each packet if available. If the percentage is less than 90%, sow a few extra seeds to account for any seeds that lack viability.
5. **Lightly press** the soil and then mist with water.
6. **Label your containers now!** Whether you use a plant marker or tape, make sure to label your containers.
7. **Cover the container.** Clear covers hold in humidity while the seeds emerge. A clear plastic wrap is fine.
8. **Place on a heat mat.** If not using a heat mat, place trays on top of or near a register, away from lights/drafts.
9. **Check your seeds daily**. The soil should be moist, but not too wet. Allow soil to dry slightly between waterings.
10. **Remove heat.** Once 90% of the seeds have sprouted, are about ½ inch tall, or have at least one set of leaves, remove the heating mat and the lid or plastic covering.
11. **Add lights.** Place seedlings under lights. Keep the lights just 2 inches above the plants (move the lights up as the plants grow). Typically, lights should be left on for 16 hours each day. However, onions should receive only 10-12 hours per day (if onions receive too much light, it will initiate an early bulb set and result in puny onions).
    a. If you keep your seedlings next to a window, make sure to use a south-facing window and remember to rotate your containers every day to keep seedlings growing evenly.
12. Air circulation. You can use a fan to circulate air around the seedlings to help make the stems stronger. More importantly, it will help to prevent fungal disease and plants from rotting due to too much moisture.
13. **Thinning**. You may have to thin the seedlings here and there to reduce competition.
14. **Pot up**. Once the seedlings have 2-3 sets of true leaves, consider transferring them into individual pots or a larger cell tray. A sterile soilless potting mix can be used for transplanting. Do not use a moisture control mix.
15. **Fertilize.** Two weeks after potting up the seedlings, start fertilizing the seedlings. Add a diluted (1/2 the recommended rate) balanced liquid fertilizer once per week. This can be done during the usual watering of the plants. Bottom-feed this liquid to prevent over watering and fungus gnat problems.
16. **Harden off.** Once seedlings are about 8-12 inches tall, and about 1 week before it's time to transplant them, you can begin to harden off your seedlings. Set the seedlings outside in a protected area in the sun for about an hour the first day, then bring them back inside. Increase the amount of time spent outside by an hour each day over the course of a week.
17. **Transplant outside.** If transplanting into containers, make sure there are enough drainage holes.

Want more seed starting tips? Check out:

https://www.gardeners.com/how-to/how-to-start-seeds/5062.html

https://www.almanac.com/starting-seeds-indoors-how-and-when-start-seeds