

Seed Starting 101

By Tammy Borden

I am continually amazed by the miracle of germination. The thought of a shriveled up seed, some the size of a grain of salt, eventually becoming a lush mass of blooming beauty never ceases to fascinate me.

While there are some basics to starting your own seeds, there is too much information than can be shared in this article. If you really want to get serious about starting seeds I suggest getting a book on plant propagation. While seed packets share important information on planting depth and germination time, there are often helpful hints that can be shared about specific cultivars that can make your plantings more successful.

For example: Did you know that morning glory and sweet pea seeds should NOT be handled with care? To help them germinate it's recommended that you scrape the seeds with sandpaper or even nick them with a knife. If that's not enough, it should be followed up by an overnight soak in luke-warm water before finally planting them in the soil. Stir in some eye of newt and you're done! Well, okay, maybe not that last part. But it's these types of specific instructions and tips that a good propagation book can offer.

Not all seeds require such techniques; in fact, most seeds are pretty straight forward. Here are some basics:

Materials and Supplies

- ✦ Seed starting mix (Generally, do not use regular potting soil. Seeds prefer a lighter mix to get started. Peat pellets are also an option.)
- ✦ Light (TIP: It's not necessary to spend a lot on expensive grow lights. Research has shown that a few bright standard fluorescent shop lights work just as well.)
- ✦ Seedling Containers/Trays (For large quantity plantings, start by seeding a large tray and transplanting the seedlings to individual cells later. If you're only planting a couple dozen plants you can plant in individual cells right away. TIP: Some plants like Nasturtium and Zinnia do not like to have their roots disturbed and prefer individual cells or peat pots, so check in your propagation book for the best method.)
- ✦ Clear Cover/Dome (If you don't get a clear "greenhouse" dome with your trays, simply use plastic wrap. The key is to let light in while keeping moisture in too.)
- ✦ Heating Mats (Specific heating mats for starting seeds are available, but expensive. TIP: I have had great success using an old electric blanket with a temperature control set low – just put a shower curtain between the blanket and seedlings to avoid getting it wet. I used a candy thermometer to monitor temperatures and kept the temperature around 70-75 degrees.)
- ✦ Plant Markers (TIP: Cut up mini blinds and a Sharpie work great. So do popsicle sticks and plastic knives.)

Getting Started:

1. Moisten your soil mix and place it in your choice of container. Mark each container with the plant name and date of planting.
2. Following the seed packet instructions, plant your seeds at the recommended depth. For some seeds like Impatiens, this just means pressing them onto the surface of the soil because they need light to germinate. For smaller seeds I generally plant 3-4 per cell. For larger seeds like Nasturtiums I only plant 1-2.

(continued on page 5)