

There's still time to plant seedlings before May!
A DIY Guide to Planting Seedlings – for The Park Hill Community Garden
Christina Battle – April 2014



just planted – with plastic dome on top to create a greenhouse-like environment

Basic Information:

Planting seedlings is a great way to get a head start on your garden while also saving money and having greater control over your veggies. My strategy this year is to plant as many seedlings as I can so that, if some don't turn out, I still have time to direct seed or purchase healthy seedlings from the garden center.

With 5 or 6 weeks to go before you're likely to start planting your garden plot (and 7 weeks until the Park Hill Garden's planting deadline of May 31st) there is still time to get some seedlings started. Below are some approximate seedling starting dates for specific vegetables:

12 to 14 weeks: chives, leeks, onions,

8 to 12 weeks: cabbage-family crops, bok choy, brussels sprouts, lettuce, peppers

6 to 8 weeks: cauliflower, eggplants, tomatoes,

2 to 4 weeks: cucumbers, melons, okra, pumpkins, squash



onion varieties planted a few weeks ago

Supplies:

You'll need a few basic things in order to get your seedlings started:

- seedling containers
- seed starting mix [If you want to make your own mix combine four parts peat moss, four parts vermiculite, and one part perlite]
- plastic to cover the seedlings while they germinate
- your seeds*

I purchase pre-ready windowsill seedling trays which cost anywhere from \$10-15 (for 20 cells). They generally come with everything you need to get started except seed starting mix.



waiting to sprout – the plastic dome acts like a mini greenhouse

Planting Steps:

1. Add your starting mix to the containers and soak – the best strategy for this is to place the containers in a tray, fill the bottom of the tray with water and allow it to naturally soak each cell. You want your cells to be damp but not soggy (too wet can cause your seeds to rot).
2. Plant seeds as noted on your seed packet. Generally you will want to plant a few seeds in each cell and thin the seedlings later.
3. Seal the tray with plastic and place in a sunny window (but not too sunny) – this creates a sort of mini greenhouse providing enough moisture and humidity for your seeds to sprout. Most seeds germinate well at about 70°F.
4. Once you see your seedlings emerge and the first leaves start to open remove the plastic and move your tray to a sunny window.
5. Seedlings need a lot of light and many people rely on fluorescent shop lights to provide adequate levels. Ideally, they will have about 12-14 hours of bright light each day. This season I'm taking my chances with a sunny, south-facing windowsill.
6. Water when soil is visibly dry – seedlings need a lot of water and dry out pretty quickly in a sunny window. Again, watering from the bottom up is a good strategy (remember: too much water can cause your seeds to rot!)

7. If your seedlings become crowded in their cells thin the weaker seedlings out. If the seedlings outgrow their containers transfer them into larger containers filled with a mix that includes compost. You can use recycled cartons or plastic containers. Just be sure to poke a drainage hole in the bottom of each.
8. About 1 week before you are ready to plant your garden, start hardening off your seedlings to help them acclimatize to the outdoors. On a warm day move the containers to a shaded, protected spot outside for a few hours. Gradually increase plants exposure to the sun and wind each day. At the end of the week leave them out overnight before transplanting into the garden.
9. If you can, it's best to transplant the seedlings to the garden on an overcast day to help ease the shock of transition from pot to ground.

*Seed life span varies and depends on storage conditions. Seeds that are kept in air-tight containers in a cool, dry place will last longer than those in more humid conditions. Here is some information on **minimum** seed life (depending on storage conditions):

- **one season** – Spinach;
- **one year** - Sweet Corn, Parsnips;
- **two years** - Bush and pole beans, Beets, Parsley, Peas, Peppers, Swiss Chard;
- **two to three years** - Leeks, onions;
- **three years** – Carrots, Cucumbers, Lettuce, Melons, Oriental greens, Tomatoes,
- **three to four years** - Squashes;
- **four years** – Turnips, Radishes;
- **three to five years** - Collard, Kale, Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, kohlrabi.

Remember these are just minimums – another good reason to start seedlings is to test your seeds before planting!

Sources:

Savonen, Carol. "How Long Do Garden Seeds Last?" Oregon State University Extension Service. N.p., 19 Feb. 2003. Web. 11 Apr. 2014.

<<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/how-long-do-garden-seeds-last>>

White, Hazel, Sanchez, Janet H., & the editors of Sunset Books. *The Edible Garden*. Menlo Park, CA: Sunset Pub., 2005. Print.

Some resources:

Heirloom Organics Seed Starting Guide - <<http://www.heirloom-organics.com/guide/seedstartingaz.html>>

Heirloom Organics Indoor Seed Starting - <<http://www.heirloom-organics.com/guide/indoorseedstarting.html>>

Guide to the Colorado Growing Season (Denver area) - <<http://www.well.com/~jnfr/garden/plantdates.html>>

Farmers Almanac – “2014 Best Spring Planting Dates for Seeds for Denver, CO” - <<http://www.almanac.com/gardening/planting-dates/CO/Denver>>