



The Five Biggest Seed Starting Mistakes – And How to Avoid Them!

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Starting your own seeds is one of the most rewarding things a gardener can do. Although it sounds easy, starting seeds inside can be difficult for a number of reasons. Our winter homes pose certain environmental challenges.

The first mistake many of us make is not giving our plants enough light. It is tempting to think that a table set by a window should be more than enough, but it won't be! Too little light will force the plant to stretch, called etiolation. This can weaken a plant, and most of the time your seedlings will end up flopping over. When you go to plant them outside after the weather settles and they are hardened off, your plants will be half laying on the ground and looking sad, but this could also lead to a number of disease problems. Fortunately, there are many light fixtures readily available to help you grow plants. You can easily find one that will fit a plant stand or shelf in your house. There are even free-standing units available.



Lighting Fixture Photo by mrl2022

If the temperature in the house is too low, the seeds might take much longer than anticipated to sprout, or they may not sprout at all. You could turn up your thermostat and heat the whole house, but this would substantially increase your utility costs. The best option would be to heat an individual room or space. If your home heating system does not allow you to do this, you could purchase an oil-filled electric radiator to bring up the temperature in your seed starting

room. A heat mat could also be used under the seed starting trays. These require a controller, are expensive, but last for many years. The disadvantage is that they can only raise the temperature to about ten degrees F above ambient.

The biggest mistake people make with any type of plant is overwatering. Wet, soggy soil makes conditions ripe for fungal disease like damping off and botrytis. Letting the soil dry out between waterings is the best way to prevent these diseases. Avoid placing plants right above a radiator or near a wood/pellet stove as these will cause the medium to dry too quickly. Humidity domes are useful when getting seeds to sprout as they keep hold the moisture in, but should be removed after germination to avoid diseases.



Humidity Dome used when starting seedlings. Photo by mrl2022.

The last problem is timing. If you start your plants too late, you could end up with tiny plants that will not fare well when placed in the ground. If a root system is not well developed when transplanting out, the plant will be more prone to wilting and potentially remain stunted or even die if careful attention is not paid to watering. Also, you may not be able to mulch properly and the plant could suffer from rapid drying out in the short-term, and excessive weed pressure in the long-term.

If you start your plants too early, they may be quite large and falling over by the time they are ready for the ground. Overgrown plants may also run out of nutrients. This results in the yellowing and loss of the lower leaves. The solution is to then fertilize your plants to correct the nutritional deficiencies, but then this exacerbates the over-growth problem. Figure out when you plan to put your plants in the ground and count back the number of days needed to germinate your seeds. Do not forget the time it will take to move your seeds outside and gradually get them used to the sun and wind. This hardening off period takes about a week or two. The seed packets will tell you how early to start your seeds from your planned plant-out date.

The final mistake is not fertilizing. Our little seedlings are growing in very small amounts of soil. Although our “soilless mixes” may have some nutrients added in, they are only meant to help the

plants get started. Once you have two sets of true leaves, it is a good idea to start fertilizing. Follow the package directions as too much is just as harmful as not enough.

So, if you plan on starting some seeds (and I hope you will), keep these five things in mind. And remember, no matter what methods you use to start seeds, keep a record of what worked and didn't and adjust accordingly the following year. Happy planting!

For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.