



Last weeks' temperatures should have coaxed you out of your winter slumber and encouraged you out to the landscape to complete your spring to-do list. If the gardening bug has gotten you, there are some things you can be planting now even if it is a little too early to plant all of your plants outside.

Starting your own transplants shouldn't feel like a daunting task. Last time we talked about the homework you have to do if you want to start you own transplants. First you need to decide what you want to plant. Next you need to decide when you want to plant outside. Keep in mind the different planting dates for warm season and cool season crops. After a little math and counting backward on the calendar you can determine when seeds should be started indoors.

Vegetables can be divided into cool season and warm season crops. Cool season crops like broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, and kohlrabi, can handle cooler spring temperatures, along with an occasional light frost, and can be planted in the garden earlier in the year compared to warm season crops. Cool season crops can be planted in the garden as early as April 1st and as late as May 10th. To have vegetable transplants ready to plant in the garden around April 1, they need to be started indoors 6-8 weeks prior to that. Count backward from April 1, which means cool season transplants would need to be planted indoors around February 17th. Eggplant, pepper, and tomato are warm season crops and shouldn't be planted in the garden until after the threat of cold temperatures and frost has passed, usually around Mother's Day. Counting backward 6-8 weeks from May 10, the warm season crops should be started indoors around March 22nd.

Planting the seeds is the easy part, once they emerge is when the work begins. The care that the seedlings require depends on how they are planted. If you planted several seeds directly into the cell packs or larger pots, now is the time to thin the number of seedlings in each cell. It is best if you clip or cut the weaker seedlings out of the cell packs instead of pulling. By cutting the weakest seedlings off at ground level, you are ensuring that the root mass of the strongest seedling remains intact and undisturbed. If you planted into a seedling flat or planted seeds into one container, then the seedlings will need to be transplanted. Pick another larger container that you want to put the transplants into and fill with potting media, not garden soil. Select the healthiest looking seedlings and carefully remove them from the flat and place into the new container. Make sure that the newly planted seedling is well watered. Take extra care not to pinch the stem as this can damage the water movement vessels in the stem and cause seedling damage.

One of the most important needs of seedlings is light. A sunny window or providing supplemental artificial light will help to ensure the plants grow quickly. Plants that are receiving enough light will remain compact and the leaves will be a nice dark green color. Plants that are a light green color or have a long internode or are stretching over toward the window are signaling that they need more light. If you are using artificial light, try to keep the light as close as one inch away from the plants. One inch might not seem far enough away, but the florescent lights don't produce that much heat to damage the plants as long as they are not touching the light bulb. As the plants grow taller, keep moving the light farther away from the growing plants to make sure they aren't touching the bulb.

How you water newly planted vegetable seedlings is also very important. There is a fine line between keeping the seedlings just moist enough, but not overly wet. Until the seeds germinate, or sprout, the top of the soil surface needs to remain moist enough that the seedlings can break through the soil surface. Once the seedlings sprout, the amount of water can be cut back to watering when the soil surface is dry to the touch. Damping off is a common infection that occurs in seedlings that are growing in a cool moist environment. It is commonly caused by fungi and causes the seedling to rot off just below the soil line. Pay close attention to the seedlings and check for issues on a regular basis.

Plan ahead, provide the proper environment, and be on the lookout for potential problems, before long the transplant crops you start now will be ready to be placed in the garden.

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