

# Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

## FACT SHEET



**Have Gardening Questions?** The **Master Gardener Help Line Hours** are 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. on Fridays (all year) as well as Wednesdays (March-November) and Mondays (April-October).  
Phone: 617-933-4929 Email: [mghelpine@masshort.org](mailto:mghelpine@masshort.org).

### Seed Starting Q & A

**Q:** What kind of equipment do I need to grow seeds?

**A: SOIL** – the best stuff to use is seed starting mix. It is sterile (no bugs, no disease), very fine, and artificially fluffy. Potting mix can also be used, especially for larger seeds; it is also sterile and artificially fluffy, just coarser. Do not use garden soil. Even if you sterilize it, it will still compact in a flower pot. In nature, critters and weather keep soil fluffy; in a pot this doesn't happen.

**Pots** – There's a tremendous variety of different of pots you can use. Generally, do not put a tiny plant in a huge pot, since it's too difficult to keep it watered correctly. Jiffy -7 pots, peat pots and newspaper pots are great for starting single plants. Larger flower pots and seedling rows are great for starting sets of plants. Peat pots, newspaper pots and flats are great for growing plants on.

**Fertilizer** – Once the seed has germinated, it will need fertilizer (remember that seedling mix is sterile – that means no nutrients either.) Liquid fertilizer is easiest to deliver at this stage.

**Q:** How much light do I need to provide?

**A:** Seedlings need light, and lots of it. They do not need much heat. You can probably grow seedlings in a very bright window, but it's much easier to put them under a 4' fluorescent shop light, with the light just above the plants (1-2"). Since you are not expecting the seedlings to bloom indoors, a cool light is sufficient (i.e. you don't need to use a grow light).

**Q:** When should I start my seeds?

**A:** Figure out when to start the seeds, generally by backing up from the "last frost" date, and get going. Ask your local garden center when the last frost date is in your area.

**Q:** What's all that information on the back of the seed packet?

**A:** The seed packet will tell you what the plant is, how long till the crop is ready (for crop seeds), how many seeds

in the pack, and what year the seeds are considered fresh; germination goes down every year after that. The packet also says how long before last frost to plant it, how deep, ideal soil temperature, how long till the seeds germinate, how much light the adult plants will need, and the ideal separation of the adult plants.

There are also some "secret codes" on the packets:

"Sow in average soil after danger of frost" means that the time from seed to bloom is relatively short, maybe 6-8 weeks. You can still start these seeds inside for earlier bloom. (e.g. Marigolds)

"To aid germination, soak seed overnight" means that if you don't soak the seed, it may not germinate. (e.g. Morning Glories)

"Sow outdoors where they are to flower" means they hate to have their roots disturbed. If you want to start these inside, start them in individual pots.

**Q:** What can go wrong?

**A:** Dry seedling mix / potting soil will shed water. If you start seeds in dry mix, get a mister and keep misting the soil with warm water till it finally starts absorbing the water.

If you get the seeds wet and then let them dry out, they will die. They are very vulnerable from the time growth starts till when the first 2 true leaves appear.

If you don't give the plants enough light, they will get very gangly. You can mitigate this somewhat when the plant is bigger by pinching the plant to encourage branching, but it is better to avoid this by giving them enough light.

**Q:** Is it cheaper to grow plants from seed or buy them?

**A:** The estimated cost for growing only one plant from seed is \$15.34. The estimated cost for growing 20 of the same plant is \$1.04 per plant. The point is that growing your own is not necessarily cheaper.

*The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics. <http://www.massmastergardeners.org/>*