

Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

FACT SHEET

Have gardening questions? Contact the **Master Gardener Help Line.**

At Mass Hort, Wellesley: mghelpline@masshort.org, 617-933-4929

At Tower Hill Botanic Garden, Boylston: hortline@towerhillbg.org, 608-869-6111 x104

Please visit our website for Help Line hours: <http://massmastergardeners.org/what-i-do/>



SEED STARTING Q & A

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

A: Soil: The best medium 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 variety of different 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.

Fertilizer: Once the seed has germinated, it will need fertilizer (remember that seedling mix is sterile – that means no nutrients either). Liquid fertilizer is the easiest way to deliver the nutrients 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: Start by backing up from the "last frost" date in your region. It can vary from town to town. Check with your local garden center or on the web for the average last frost date in your area.

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

A: The seed packet describes the type of plant, maturity date, number of seeds in packet, expiration date of freshness of seeds, when to plant, depth, ideal soil temperature, germination date, amount of light and transplant information. "Secret" codes on the packets include "To aid germination, soak seed overnight" which means that if you don't soak the seed, it may not germinate. (e.g. Morning Glories) and "Sow outdoors where they are to flower" means they hate to have their roots disturbed. If you want to start these seeds 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 until it finally starts absorbing the water. If you get the seeds wet and they dry out, they will die. Seeds are very vulnerable from the time growth starts until the appearance of the first 2 true leaves. 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, but gives you the opportunity to explore various plant types and varieties that are not available at garden centers.

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.

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