

# A Good Start

Growing your own vegetable transplants **Story and Photography By Dee A. Nash**



**1.** Moistening your finger makes picking up individual seeds much easier. **2.** Don't forget to label seeds/trays before planting. Otherwise you won't be able to tell one tomato from another. **3.** Starting seeds in recycled containers is an inexpensive way to grow your transplants. Make sure the containers are covered with clear plastic to increase germination rate. **4.** Tomato seedlings with their cotyledon and first true set of leaves. You can now tell they are tomato plants. **5.** Before using recycled containers, disinfect them using a bleach solution and remember to poke holes for drainage.

One of the cheapest ways to garden in Oklahoma is to grow your own transplants. Starting vegetable and flower seeds indoors isn't as hard as you might think, and broken down into steps, the process is even more straightforward.

In central Oklahoma, the transplant date for warm-weather crops is around April 20. To know when to start tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants, read the info on your seed packets and count back the days from the transplant date.

Use good-quality, potting soil without extra fertilizer. Locally owned nurseries often they make their own mix of locally sourced ingredients or can steer you to a quality low-nutrient one. You can also use seed-starting mix, but it's a finer, sifted soil and could wash away when watered from above; water from below for best results.

Choose your containers. You can purchase seed-starting trays or recycle containers you have on hand. Plastic to-go boxes with lids, like those for rotisserie chicken and salad, work well. For seed-starting trays, the Jiffy Pro-Hex seed trays are deep and encourage root growth. To keep plastic out of landfills, store and reuse containers after disinfecting them for at least 10 minutes in a 10 percent bleach solution. Don't forget tags and a water-resistant permanent marker.

Fill the containers with moistened potting soil; eliminating air pockets will help the seeds adhere to the potting soil. If your tap water is chlorinated, let it stand 24 hours before using or consider using distilled water.

Now, comes the best part – seeds. If you're already a gardener, you received loads of seed catalogs in January. Try not to overbuy – you'll probably only need one packet per variety. If you have a small garden, try the trio packages of seeds, such as the Asian Eggplant Trio from Renee's Garden Seeds. If you plan on growing eggplant, the seeds will need a heat mat to

germinate. You can find heat mats locally or online. To pick up seeds easily, wet your finger and just touch the seed you want.

Push the seeds down into the soil with your finger – the larger the seed, the deeper it's planted. Some seeds require light to germinate, so check your seed packet.

If you're using recycled containers and square seed trays, scatter seed across the top and cover with soil. Later, after your plants have true leaves, gently take them out and place them in larger pots. Then cover seeds with grit or vermiculite, which helps keep the soil moist, keeps the seeds in place, and seems to slow fungus gnat egg production. Water seeds again and then cover with a clear plastic lids or Glad Press 'n Seal wrap. In a few days, your seeds will spring into action and you can remove the plastic. Wait until plants have their second set of leaves, which are their true leaves. The first two "leaves" that emerge from the seed are cotyledon, part of the seed's embryo. Loosen the wrap as plants grow, so it doesn't squish them.

Place containers under grow lights or in a south-facing window. Even with the sunlight from the window, they may become leggy. I use cool- and warm-spectrum fluorescent light bulbs. You can buy expensive grow lights, but they aren't necessary. If growing in a window, turn your plants every day so they'll grow straight and strong. Ace gardener Monty Don from UK's *Gardeners' World* suggests covering cardboard with aluminum foil and bending it to make an L-shape. Tuck one end under your container facing the window, reflecting light from the foil onto your plants.

As the plants grow, transplant them into larger containers and begin hardening them on warm days. Place plants in a shaded spot on sunny days to avoid sunburn. Start by taking them outside for an hour, increasing the amount of time every day for a couple of weeks before actually planting them outside.

And that's it! You're now on your way to growing your own transplants. If you try it, you'll find it cheaper than buying plants from the nursery. Plus, is there any job better than starting seeds? I don't think so. 🐾

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**6.** Once the plants outgrow their initial containers, transplant them into larger ones. A pot equivalent to a 4-inch container will usually suffice until they go outside. **7.** Pepper plants transplanted into 4-inch containers topped with a fine layer of grit. **8.** Transplants hardening off outside in partial shade.

## Seed-Sowing Station

**A few years ago my husband and I built a seed-sowing station to grow our transplants. Why would anyone need a seed-sowing station?**

- To get ahead of the game in early spring with cabbage, broccoli, and other plants that need to be started indoors. For a fall garden, you can start lettuce and other cool-season crops earlier inside while temperatures outside are still too high.
- To grow unique vegetable varieties. You're not limited to what the box stores or local nursery has in stock.
- If you can't afford a greenhouse, this is the next best thing.

### Supplies

- Metal closet rack with 1-inch adjustable shelves. Mine was 5 feet tall, but you can go shorter.
- Four casters (for mobility needed to catch the sunlight anywhere in the house.)
- 4-foot light fixtures and full-spectrum fluorescent bulbs. The fixtures should be grounded and attached to the met-

al frame and plugged into a grounded wall outlet to prevent shock. Water and electricity can be quite shocking when they get together.

- Four heat mats – again, plugged into a grounded outlet.
- Recycled seed trays
- Seeds
- Soilless potting mix
- Watering can