

Good Life

SEED-STARTING SECRETS



Seeds germinated in blocks of soil develop healthy root systems to plant outdoors.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GARDENER'S WORKSHOP



Starting from scratch with plants, vegetables and herbs offers gardeners a gratifying reward

BY KATHY VAN MULEKOM | Special to the Daily Press

There's something satisfying about growing vegetables, herbs and flowers from seeds, according to local propagators.

"Whether planting seeds straight in the garden or starting them indoors, seed starting opens a new doorway to your garden," says Lisa Ziegler of The Gardener's Workshop, a cut-flower farm and online gardening tool and seed shop — www.shoptgw.com — in Newport News.

"No other success in the garden brings such satisfaction," she said.

"And yet, the experience of seed starting is one that many gardeners pass on. Why? Because, as little and innocent as those seeds appear, they are full of mystery and unknowns for the first-time or failed seed starter."

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Garden

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Here's what Ziegler and two other local propagators say about successfully starting plants from seed:

Wendy Iles:
Hampton Grows

In March 2012, long-time gardener Wendy Iles began sharing the process of "seed to table" with young and old residents in Hampton. She founded the nonprofit Hampton Grows — www.HamptonGrows.org — and has helped put in at least five gardens in Hampton.

"I like to start short-germinating seeds, like lettuces, peas, basil, green beans and tomatoes," she says.

"Of course, anything I can start growing after a blast of winter is an early favorite. Spring peas can work the soil, and taste so sweet and crunchy right off the vine. You can start herbs in just about any sunny spot indoors. I love almost instant gratification, and check daily for emerging seedlings."

To make the seed-starting process really easy and economical, Iles likes to show how to start seedlings in empty cardboard toilet paper rolls:

■ Assemble supplies: empty toilet paper rolls, seeds, potting mix, permanent marker and plant labels.

■ Fold in one edge of the toilet paper roll.

■ Press in corner. Then opposite corner to create the bottom.

■ Fill with potting mix. Tamp down the soil and add more as needed to fill to 3/4 full. Make a small hole in the center.

■ Select your seeds. Larger seeds are easier for kids or elderly to work with.

■ Drop one to two seeds in each hole.

■ Using a Popsicle stick, cover the seeds lightly.

■ Recycle blinds! Measure the blind and cut to fit your seedling "pot."

■ Label the seedlings so there's no guess work.

■ Use recycled blinds, Popsicle sticks or plant markers.

■ Set the pot in a shallow bowl of water to keep from disturbing the seeds. Keep the rolls damp, but not soaked.

"The rolls can be planted directly into the ground or in a bigger pot and are easy for small hands to manipulate without crushing the roots," says Iles.

Denise Greene:
Sassafras Farm

Denise Greene owns Sassafras Farm in Gloucester Point and she specializes in raising native plants, especially ones that provide habitat for bees, birds and butterflies. She will be at the Williamsburg Farmers Market this season with complete wildflower garden kits that include a



Resources

■ "Starting Seeds" helps you learn how to grow healthy, productive vegetables, herbs and flowers from seed. New from Storey Publishing, the softback book is geared for all level gardeners, and is especially helpful to beginners. \$8.95.

■ Seed-starting DVD with Lisa Ziegler features how to plant seeds in the garden and how to use the soil-blocking technique to start seeds. 36 minutes; \$14.95; heirloom and organic seeds; www.shoptgw.com or 757-877-7159.

■ National Garden Bureau at www.ngb.org.

■ Virginia Cooperative Extension at www.ext.vt.edu.

uses a boiling water technique for those.

"I put the seeds in a coffee mug, pour boiling water on them and soak them for 24 hours before planting them," she says.

"My favorites from this group are *Hibiscus moscheutos*, or rose mallow; *Kosteletskya virginica*, or seashore mallow; *Baptisia*, or wild indigo; and *Lupinus perennis*, or sundial lupine."

Lisa Ziegler:
The Gardener's Workshop

First, and foremost, buy from a reputable source, advises Ziegler. "How seeds are handled and stored makes or breaks if a seed is viable when you purchase it," she said. "Cheap dime store seed packets often lead to squashed dreams."

You should also know your seeds prefer to be started: germinated indoors and transplanted outdoors as seedlings or sown directly in the garden.

"This is a common reason folks fail," she said. "They plant seeds in the garden that perform best when started indoors or vice versa."

Ziegler also recommends:

■ Determine if seeds need to be covered with soil or just placed firmly on soil surface.

■ Read the label to see when seeds should be planted.

■ Prepare soil properly.

■ For indoor seedlings, give them what they need most: heat, light and good food.

"Good food provides fuel for your seedling to develop naturally into a strong transplant," she says.

"We use a seaweed/kelp fertilizer that is organic, which means it doesn't take your plant from zero to 60 miles an hour in a day, but provides a slow, steady supply of food that enriches growth and helps the plant to become more self-sustaining with each application."

Contact Kathy at kvanmulkom@aol.com.

tray of 18 plants and a free garden design. She will also have kits for butterfly, woodland, tall and low meadow and rain gardens.

"I put most of my seeds in a plastic baggie in moist seed mix and refrigerate them for 90 days to stratify them," says Greene, a member of the John Clayton Chapter, Virginia Native Plant Society.

"Some of the better-known natives with this requirement are

Asclepias tuberosa (butterfly-weed), *Eupatorium maculatum* (Joe-pye weed) and *Solidago* sp. (goldenrods).

"Some of my favorite lesser-known species that require this method are *Eryngium yuccifolium* (rattlesnake master), *Scutellaria ovata* (heart-leaf skullcap) and *Silphium perfoliatum* (cup plant)."

A few native perennial species don't require any special treat-

ment and are easy for beginners, she continues. These include the *Coreopsis* species (her favorite is *Coreopsis pubescens*, or star tickseed); *Helianthus* (sunflowers; her favorite is *Helianthus angustifolius*, or narrow-leaved sunflower) and asters (she likes *Symphoricarpos* leaf, or smooth aster.).

Some species have a hard seed coat that requires scarification to allow them to germinate. Greene

Above: Empty toilet tissue rolls can be turned into seed-germinating pots you can plant outdoors.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WENDY ILES

At left: The Gardener's Workshop soil-blocking kit helps you germinate seeds indoors.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GARDENER'S WORKSHOP