

TOP TEN TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL SEED STARTING

By "Herb Whisperer" Charlotte Gardner

1—**SOIL**--NEVER use garden soil for starting seeds indoors! Garden soil may contain bacterial and fungal spores that might harm seedlings as they grow and will also prevent good drainage and good root formation. Use a good quality lightweight potting mix or a specially formulated seed starting mix--there are many brands available in garden centers and big box stores.

2—**SEED FLATS**--ALWAYS use clean containers for seed flats! Thoroughly scrub flats that have been used previously. There are numerous types of packaging containers that can be recycled from products purchased from the grocery store (egg cartons, plastic flats from bakery items, meat products, yogurt cups, etc.) Seed flats that hold 3 to 4 inches of soil are best to promote rapid and healthy root growth.

3—**DRAINAGE**--ALWAYS be sure to punch plenty of holes in the bottom of container to create plenty of drainage. Constantly wet soil creates fungal or mold growth that contributes to "damping off" of the seedlings (stems collapse at soil level and die).

4—**GERMINATION**--Provide warm conditions to help speed germination of seeds. A commercial heat mat is worth the investment when growing a large quantity of seedlings. Germination temps vary for different types of seeds, but most seeds prefer temps around 75-80 degrees. This info is often on seed packet or check reference material for specific info. Keep soil moist during germination—especially for seeds that are surface sown! Covering seed flat with a plastic cover helps prevent soil—and seeds—from drying out while germinating. If seeds are allowed to dry out, they can rarely be revived!

5—**LIGHTING**—Artificial lighting (florescent or LED bulbs) is best for growing compact healthy seedlings. Run the lights for 14 to 16 hours a day—putting the lights on a timer is the best way to accomplish this. Keep lights close to the top leaves of the seedlings--3 or 4 inches from the top leaves is best. You will need to provide some means for raising the lights as the seedlings grow—installing light fixtures on chains or cords accomplishes this.

6—**WATERING**—Keep soil moist, but NOT "soggy"! Overwatering leads to "damping off" of seedlings.

7—**GROWING CONDITIONS**—Providing good airflow in and around the seedlings is important to keep seedlings healthy. A ceiling fan or oscillating fan set on low (creating a **gentle "breeze"**) helps circulate air and helps strengthen the seedlings' stems as they grow.

8—**THINNING**—Once seedlings form their first or 2nd set of "true leaves" it is best to start thinning the seedlings out. This helps with air circulation as well as helps prevent competition between seedlings. This can be accomplished using tweezers or fingers to **gently** pull excess plants from the soil.

9—**GROWING ON**—Once seedlings have several sets of "true leaves" it is time to start moving them to larger containers to give them more room to grow sturdy/individual root systems. ALWAYS handle seedlings by their leaves NOT by their stems—the stems are fragile and easily damaged at this point!

10—**HARDENING OFF**—The plants need to move **gradually** into growing conditions that are like their destination in the garden. Decrease watering, length of light, and temperature--expose plants to current outside weather conditions **very** gradually! This process should take about 2 weeks prior to planting the in the garden. Try to choose a cloudy—not windy—day to transplant.