

K-STATE

Research and Extension

Johnson County

Time to start thinking transplants

OLATHE, Kans. — It may be cold outside, but that doesn't mean you can't start preparing for your spring garden. If a vegetable garden is in your plans, then starting your own vegetable plants from seed makes a lot of sense, especially if you are planning a large garden. If a smaller garden is in your plans, collaborate with friends, family and neighbors to grow enough tomatoes, peppers and eggplant for everyone! Maybe it is not about the numbers. Starting your own transplants can be fun and is a great way to scratch that gardening itch during the cloudy winter days.

Timing is everything

In order for seedlings to be ready for planting day you need to pay attention to the calendar. Work backwards for spring planting using the last frost date as a basic guideline. Mid-May or around Mother's Day is considered safe to plant out crops that cannot tolerate a frost or need warm soil temperatures for best growth. This would include favorites such as tomatoes and peppers.

Cool loving vegetables such as broccoli and cabbage will tolerate light freezes and need a longer cooler growing period to produce. These vegetables are best planted from transplants in the garden around the end of March.

Deciding when to start can be a challenge. But keep in mind most garden transplants need around six to eight weeks of growth to be ready for outdoor planting. Determine the seed planting date by counting backwards on the calendar from your desired setting out date. Mid-May tomatoes should be seeded mid to late March. Cool loving broccoli will be planted in mid to late February.

The amount of time transplants need to grow can vary greatly based on temperatures so be sure to keep good notes. Warmer locations will grow faster than a cooler room. The most common mistake most people make is starting too early and the plants become overgrown and straggly.

Light it up

The key to success in starting seeds is providing plenty of good quality light. Once the seeds have germinated, they will need a bright, ample supply of light for at least 14 – 16 hours a day. Placing the plants in a south facing window is not enough as they will become leggy. We have probably all learned this from experience as a child or adult. But don't worry, you will not need to invest in fancy "grow lights" to get the job done.

Plain, ordinary shop lights with regular florescent bulbs will provide the needed light for your transplants. Suspend the lights over the germinated seedlings, 2 to 4 inches above the tops. As the plants grow, move the lights up keeping within about 4 inches of the top green growth. Suspending the lights from the ceiling, or a simple frame makes this easy to do. The key with the shop lights is that they provide bright, intense lighting for a long period of time which helps create short, stocky plants for the garden. A timer can be a life saver and make growing plants under lights more enjoyable.

If you are new to starting seeds, start small. A single plastic seedling tray or small container is a good place to start in combination with an easy plant, such as tomatoes. Six packs in a typical tray will provide enough space for up to 72 plants.

Starting transplants can be fun for the family so don't forget to include the kids in the experience as growing seeds is great for learning.

-Dennis Patton, County Extension Agent, Horticulture (913) 715-7000

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