

# The Veggie Corner

By Jackie Lehr, URI Master Gardener



To a vegetable gardener, nothing signals the coming of spring like the arrival of seed catalogs and the appearance of retail seed displays. If seed starting indoors has intimidated you in the past, why not give it a try this year? Discover how easy, fun, and satisfying it is to grow your own vegetables from seed.

You can set up a seed starting area with items you have on hand and a few supplies from a garden store or hardware store. Your shopping list might include:

**Heat mat:** Many seeds need heat to germinate. An electric heat mat is the most efficient way to provide bottom heat to the soil.

**Florescent light fixture and tubes:** A sunny window does not provide enough light to seedlings. An inexpensive shop light with one cool white and one warm white tube is a good light source. A timer is helpful to turn the lights on and off automatically.

**Soil-less mix and potting soil:** Seeds should be started in a soilless potting mix to prevent the seedlings from being exposed to disease. The seedlings will be transplanted into potting soil to grow on.

**Containers:** All containers must be clean and have holes for drainage in the bottom. Seed starting flats that have a tray on the bottom and a clear plastic cover on the top are ideal. Plastic six-packs or four-packs are good for transplanting the seedlings to grow on. Use peat pots to start seeds for plants that resent having their root systems disturbed when being transplanted into the garden.

Draw your garden plan on graph paper or a template to determine how much space you have, what plants you want to grow, and how many plants you need. This might help you rein in the impulse to order more seeds than you need, will help you decide how many containers and how much potting soil you need, and will keep you from starting too many plants.

Not all vegetable seeds need to be started indoors. Read your seed catalogs carefully, and purchase seeds so you will receive them in time to start them at the right time, indoors or outdoors.

There is a wealth of information in seed catalogs such as *Johnny's Selected Seeds* and on the seed packets themselves. It is important to know when to start each type of seed so the seedlings will be hardened off and ready to be planted into the garden at the right time. To decide when to start the seeds, refer to the RI planting guide at <http://urimga.org/RIVegPlantingGrid.pdf> for the best dates to set out transplants of each vegetable variety you have chosen, then read the seed packets to find out how many weeks before that date to start each type of seed. For example, the URI chart recommends setting peppers and tomatoes out in the garden around June 1. Johnny's Selected Seed catalog recommends that peppers be started eight weeks before they will be set out, and that tomatoes be started no sooner than 5 – 6 weeks before. Count eight weeks backward from June 1. Start pepper seed around April 6, and start tomato seed 2-3 weeks later.

Other important information to note on the seed packet is planting depth and days until germination. The planting depth is how much soil is needed to cover the seed in order for it to germinate. The phrase 'needs light to germinate' means that the seed should be sown on the soil surface and not covered. Days until germination is how much time should pass until the seed leaves appear above the soil.

Plant the seeds according to the instructions on the seed packet. Label the containers, water them, and set the covered tray on the heat mat. It is not necessary to turn on the florescent light until the seeds germinate. Keep the soil moist, not wet, and check for germination. When the seedlings emerge, remove the plastic cover, take them off the heat mat, and put them under the fluorescent light, with the light 4-6 inches above the plants, for 14-16 hours a day.

The cotyledons, or seed leaves, are the first set of leaves that emerge from the soil. The next leaves that appear on the seedling are its first true leaves. When the true leaves are fully formed, transplant the seedlings into potting soil and water them. Once a week, water with a weak solution of fish or seaweed based fertilizer.

Seven to ten days before planting into the garden, harden off the seedlings by putting them outside in an area that is protected from wind, rain, and direct sun. Gradually increase exposure to sun throughout the week, and then transplant the seedlings into the garden and water them in.

It is fun and exciting to care for seedlings and watch them mature in the garden during the summer and fall. It is satisfying to harvest vegetables from the garden for meals and to share with neighbors. It is deeply rewarding to experience the miracle of a seed.