



Columbia Nursery

Starting Seeds Indoors: A Guide for Gardeners

Growing your own plants from seed is a rewarding and useful gardening skill. At Columbia Nursery, we encourage starting certain plants indoors to get a head start on the season, especially in Montana's shorter growing window. You'll discover new varieties, save money, and control the growing process from seed to harvest.

Choosing and Preparing Seeds

Purchase fresh seeds marked for the current year from reliable sources to ensure good germination. While some seeds can be saved for future use, improper storage can reduce their viability. In limited space, focus on starting seeds indoors only for plants that need extra time to mature in our climate. Refer to our seed starting chart for guidance.

Understanding Montana's Growing Season

Montana's last average frost is around the third week of May, and the first fall frost usually happens by the third week of September. This gives gardeners about 126 days to grow crops outdoors. Use seed packet information to calculate planting dates, and remember that some dates refer to days from flowering or germination, not from the day you sow the seeds.

Soil and Containers

Use a seed starting mix, not garden or potting soil. Seed start mixes are sterile, finely textured, and retain moisture well, helping fragile roots grow. Pre-moisten the mix so it holds together without dripping. Start seeds in small containers (like 2-inch pots) with drainage holes. Recycled containers such as yogurt cups or cardboard tubes work too—just ensure they drain well.

Planting and Labeling Seeds

Fill containers with moistened mix and label each variety to avoid confusion later. Follow the planting depth instructions on the seed packets carefully. Plant 2-3 seeds per hole unless the seeds are old.

Maintaining Moisture and Temperature

Keep the seed mix evenly moist but not soggy. Use clear plastic covers or plastic wrap to retain humidity. Avoid using softened water, which contains salts harmful to seedlings. Consistent warmth is critical. Use heating mats or place containers in a warm spot that stays above 65°F, even at night. For gentle supplemental heat, try a simple incandescent bulb, but always consider fire safety.



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Providing Light

Once seeds sprout, they need full-spectrum light. Montana's natural winter and early spring light isn't sufficient, so use grow lights placed about 6 inches above the seedlings. Adjust the light as plants grow, maintaining that distance. Run lights for 6-8 hours daily, but not continuously.

Seedling Care After Germination

Mist seedlings to keep them moist but avoid overwatering. When seedlings develop their first true leaves (usually the second set of leaves), begin feeding them with a diluted water-soluble fertilizer every other day. Gradually increase the strength to full strength over time.

Thinning and Strengthening Seedlings

If multiple seedlings sprout in one spot, thin them by snipping the extra plants at the base with small scissors. This gives remaining seedlings room to grow. Gently brushing your hand over seedlings or using a fan will help strengthen their stems.

Transplanting to Larger Containers

When seedlings reach 4-6 inches tall, remove covers and transplant to larger containers if needed. Use potting soil for this stage. Handle seedlings gently, and transplant them at the same depth they were growing previously.

Next Steps

Once your seedlings are ready, follow our guide on hardening off and transplanting into the garden. Refer to our planting charts for details on each vegetable. Feel free to call Columbia Nursery with any questions. Happy planting!

Visit Columbia Nursery for more gardening tips, supplies, and friendly advice!