

# Bigger Isn't Always Better for the Frugal Gardener



Over the years as I've worked to maintain and cultivate my garden frugally, I've realized that bigger isn't necessarily better. When I used to garden in a small partially shaded area, I often dreamed of a larger plot of land where I could expand my efforts. I no longer wanted to be stuck with a limited planting area. I felt suffocated and found it challenging to grow everything I wanted to.

Years later, I'm lucky to have more space, but I still find myself wanting more. I dream of building additional raised beds and filling out every corner of my yard. I always feel stifled at the start of a season. I often think I'll run out of room and in the planning phase. So I conjure up plans to add container plants here and there, think about where I might want to build the next raised bed, and try to squeeze in every

single plant on my wish list. At the start of the season, when there's still snow on the ground, the options seem endless, and it's all very exciting.

## **A Case for Small Gardens**

I often hear from friends who have limited space for growing veggies that they're unsure of how to start and think that their tiny balcony or minuscule grassy area isn't right for a garden.

I'm quick to correct them. You can grow a garden nearly anywhere. And there's something to be said about keeping things small. For beginners, a small garden is simply easier to manage. You don't need to weed as often, you can easily notice problems when they arise, and you won't find yourself overwhelmed with produce to harvest.

As a veteran gardener, I appreciate the appeal of a small garden more than ever. As I add on fabric pots, plastic containers, and raised beds around my yard, I realize that the effort involved grows along with my garden. I love being able to grow more and harvest more. But along with that benefit comes more work and stress.

## **Master the Compact First**

Before I add on, my strategy is always to master the current space I have. Last year, I thought about adding two additional beds to my setup, but I decided that it made more sense to continue growing in my current raised beds until I find I'm desperate for more room.

## **The Challenges of a Large Garden**

What's the problem with a large garden? Nothing! But it does come with challenges. While compact gardens leave you with limited planting options, a large garden poses the following

difficulties:

- It's expensive: filling up beds with good quality soil mix, building structures, and fertilizing, all cost more because there's a larger area to deal with.
- It's harder to keep up with the harvest: more plants means there's more to harvest, and while that sounds amazing, sometimes it's tough to keep up with everything. It requires a keen eye and the development of habits to avoid spoilage and early bolting.
- So much weeding and maintenance: You'll need to weed, water, and deal with pests on a larger scale, which takes more time out of your daily schedule.

Does this mean you shouldn't expand your garden? Not at all! A vast growing space is a beautiful thing. What I'm saying is that there's nothing wrong with keeping things small. If you're a frugal gardener who doesn't have the budget to expand, that's fine. If you're just starting out, keeping your growing space small is a great way to avoid feeling overwhelmed. I think weighing the pros and cons of garden sizes is well worth it.

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## **The Importance of Daily Garden Checks**





I try to walk through my garden on a daily basis. Whether it's bright and early on a weekday morning when the rabbits are out, and there's still dew sitting on leaves, or it's evening, and the sun is setting. Even when my schedule is out of control, I make it a priority to visit the garden, because it's the first step in nurturing the vibrant, growing space.

## **Location**

Before I go into why it's so essential to casually stroll by your plants every day, I want to talk a bit about garden location. It's easy for me to walk through my garden after a hard morning run or in the evening as the world begins to get sleepy because my garden is close to my home. I simply walk outside to my deck to check on my container plants and trot down a few steps to check on the rest of my plants. I can even spy my raised beds from my kitchen window, so squirrels and other hungry mammals can't munch on my produce in private.

Having your garden in a convenient location is a must. If you tuck it away in a far away corner of your yard, you won't find yourself checking on your vegetables often. A hidden garden that's out of reach will be one where plants aren't tended to as often and where fresh, ready-to-pick produce sits unnoticed.

When starting a garden, pick an easy-to-reach area that you will enjoy visiting. If you're new, I recommend starting with containers or a raised bed close to your home. The closer, the better.

## The Importance of Garden Walkthroughs

Even if you're just checking on a few container plants, it's vital to look at your garden regularly. I enjoy daily checks, but a stroll by your plants every few days is usually just as effective. Why bother observing your plants so frequently?

**It's good for you.** Going out to the garden is one of the least hectic moments of my day. I breathe in the fresh air, feel the sunshine (or rain!) on my skin, and I swear I feel my heartbeat slow and my blood pressure decrease.

**Early detection.** Frequently passing by your plants allows you to spot pest damage early, so you can swiftly address the problem and avoid disaster. If you're checking on your plants regularly, you'll also be able to spot changes in foliage that may signal disease or nutrient deficiencies.

**Nothing goes to waste.** As you walk through your garden each day, you'll always be aware of what's ready to harvest or what will be ready soon. Having this knowledge ensures that you'll pick things quickly and never waste anything that you've grown.

**Stop weeds in their tracks.** Like pests, weeds can quickly get out of hand if you don't pull them as soon as you notice them.

Leave your garden alone for a week, and pulling weeds becomes a chore. Daily checks allow you to casually snatch errant plants out of the ground without much effort.

**Watering.** Your plants need water to thrive, and while you can often rely on Mother Nature to quench their thirst, you should be prepared to water your plants regularly. If your garden walkthroughs are a routine, incorporate regular waterings, too. Just be sure to check the forecast to avoid overwatering!

*I visit my garden to care for my plants but also to care for myself. My mornings among the leaves, blossoms, and chirping birds always seems to improve my mood ten-fold. The routine calms me, quiets my worries and anxieties about the upcoming day, and even if it lasts a short while, fills me with peace.*

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## **Do I Really Need to Start Seeds Indoors?**



Seed starting this year was hit or miss. A few things grew beautifully, but I had to deal with a lot of problems. Seeds were not sprouting, mold was forming on the soil, and I had to deal with damping off. I worked hard to sanitize my seed starting equipment and create a hospital environment for my seedlings, but sometimes things just don't work out. I ended up purchasing some starts to replace lost seedlings, which always makes me feel terribly guilty. Like I'm skipping a step.

Last year, I didn't even bother with seed starting. My aunt passed away in the spring, and I was in no shape or mood to get excited about gardening. I kept my seed starting stuff tucked away in storage and didn't think about my garden for a while. Typically, in March I'm already starting to dream about all the vegetable varieties I'm going to plant, and I'm closely watching the weather forecast. When things seem to have turned upside down, though, it's hard to fantasize about growing plants.



Instead, in the early portion of the summer, my husband tagged along with me to our local nursery to help me pick out a few garden plants in an effort to brighten my spirits. I didn't feel bad then that I had skipped my usual seed starting.

This year though, with all the setbacks I experienced as things failed to thrive on my grow shelves, visiting the nursery to buy transplants produced a pang of guilt. It's hard not to feel like a failure.

But as I loaded my cart up with heat-loving eggplants and tomatoes, I realized it was perfectly fine to start a garden with transplants. There are surely pros and cons, but it doesn't make you or I any less of a gardener. Many squares in my raised beds are filling out with seeds I sowed at the start of the season. A few surviving seedlings managed to settle in quite nicely in their garden squares and containers, too.

So let's examine the pros and cons of each garden-starting method, shall we?

### **Benefits and downsides of seed starting**

Seed starting is a customizable process. Make it all complicated or simple as you want. An involved setup with grow lights, shelves, and sturdy equipment naturally incurs higher costs than a basic windowsill setup, but it's easy to adjust according to a set budget. Seed starting is also relatively easy, fun, and allows growers to try a myriad of vegetable varieties not typically available for purchase as transplants in the spring. Depending on your setup, starting seeds indoors is often cheaper overall than buying starts.

Seed starting, though, does require patience and effort since some seeds need to be started quite early and babysat up until their transplant date. When starting seedlings, you can share extras or even sell them and having a seed starting setup makes succession growing possible. Seed starting does require some space, though. You'll also need to harden off seedlings



in the spring when it's time to transplant them outdoors. A plus with growing your own starts, however, is that you know exactly how they've been grown.

## **Benefits and downsides of buying transplants**

The biggest downside is that transplants can be expensive. Look for sales at your local nursery or attend plant swaps and sales put on by local horticultural societies to save money. When buying starts, you don't know how they've been grown. Are they organic? Have they been sprayed with pesticides? You'll sometimes find this information readily available, but not always. When buying transplants, you also have a limited amount of choice available to you. With seeds, you can choose from an array of varieties. The benefit of selecting transplants from reputable growers? The plants grown are often explicitly chosen because they grow well within your region.

If you have limited room and little time to bother with seed starting, transplants are an excellent option.

## **Why buy transplants?**

- Easier than seed starting
- Perfect for starting a new garden (especially in cases where you're starting late in the season)
- Great for beginners
- No indoor space required
- Some plants are incredibly tough to start from seed (e.g., asparagus)

When buying seedlings, you do lose the experience of growing plants from seed. There's nothing like it, but if circumstances require you to skip seed starting, there's genuinely nothing wrong with heading to your local nursery for a green-themed shopping trip.

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# The Number One Tenet of Frugal Gardening: Plant What You Love



Apologies for the delay in posting this week. I managed to get mild food poisoning after a lovely brunch, and my stomach was in knots for nearly two days. The gardening season is definitely on its way, though! I love seeing photos of gardens slowly turning green and spotting hidden veggie beds in front or backyards as I walk my dogs or head out on a run. I particularly adore seeing new gardeners get excited about their first sprouts. It's an exciting time! Even as someone

who has gardened for a while now, I never tire of seeing seedlings pop out of the earth or watching plants grow over the summer months. If I'm swamped or the weather isn't great, and I get stuck inside for a few days, it's so rewarding to re-enter the garden and be treated to a beautiful blooming oasis.

Harvest is still a little ways off for me as of yet – I expect I'll be picking radishes, lettuce, and Asian greens once June rolls around – but I'm already fantasizing about what I'm going to cook and prepare with the fresh produce from my garden. I've planted more kale than usual this year and plenty of other hardy greens. Once grown, they fill out the space quite nicely, but they're also my favorite veggies to eat. It's why I've dedicated two full beds to growing brassicas (a vegetable family that includes cabbage, kale, radish, etc.). I just love eating those vegetables!

I see a lot of gardening guides and books suggest which plants to grow. Tomatoes, peas, beans, radishes. They're relatively easy to grow and high-reward. Who doesn't love to pick a fresh tomato off the vine and slice it up for a tasty lunchtime sandwich? Cucumbers are often recommended as an easy first-time vegetable.

You won't find cucumbers in my garden, though. I'm not a huge fan, and I get enough of them in my local farm's CSA basket. I don't need a bundle more to snack on. I want to urge you not to bother planting vegetables and varieties you don't love to eat. Don't waste time, effort, and space on nurturing plants that will feel like a chore to harvest and cook with.

Grow your favorite things. Yes, even if they're challenging to grow! Even as a frugal gardener. If you have a whole lot of excess space and plenty of people to share with, go ahead, and allocate a bit of room for lesser preferred veg. But if you're tight on space, don't waste it on produce that doesn't excite you. **Frugal gardening is about saving money, yes, but it's**



**also about reducing waste.** Wasting produce, after all, is wasting money! When I grow cucumbers, I tend to forget to harvest them, leaving them on the vine to rot, which then attracts pests. When I do harvest them, they often sit unused until they waste away. Why continue to worry and take on guilt when I could simply devote more space to favorites like kale and collards?

What's your favorite garden vegetable? Do you prefer to leave extra room for flowers and herbs instead?

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## **Hardening Off: What is it and Why Does it Matter?**



A friend recently asked me about the process of hardening off



plants, so I decided to answer the question here. Hardening off is something I didn't realize was necessary when I first began gardening. I didn't have to deal with the consequences of skipping the step, though, because in my early gardening days I mostly direct sowed all my plants. Today, hardening off is an important part of my transplanting routine even if I hate it with a passion.

## What is hardening off?

The process involves gradually exposing your indoor starts to the outside world. For weeks (and in some cases even months) your little seedlings have been coddled. You've provided them with the ideal conditions to grow and thrive. Thrusting them outdoors without preparing is the perfect way to ruin all your hard work. Indoor-grown plants have never experienced the power of the sun or the fluctuating climate since they've lived their lives on a windowsill or under grow lights. Via the process of hardening off, you allow your seedlings to get used to life outside.

## How do I harden off my seedlings?

When it comes time to transplant certain plants outdoors, set aside a week or so to begin the hardening off process. Mark the start of the process on your calendar so you can keep track. I highly suggest investing in heavy-duty trays to make it easier to move your seedlings around. A plastic tray from the dollar store, a rolling cart, an easy-to-move table, are all suitable options. Here's how the process should work:

- **Start the process on a nice day.** Don't begin hardening off plants if it's incredibly cold outside or if there's a rainstorm brewing. If there's no way to avoid weather extremes, keep an eye on your plants and offer up added protection (like fleece row covers if temps drastically plummet during your week of hardening off).
- **Start slow.** Bring your transplants outside and place

them in a semi-shaded area for a few hours. Avoid direct sunlight right away to prevent leaf burn. Your indoor babies aren't yet used to the strength of the sun's rays.

- **Each day, increase your plant's time out in the sun.** If it's cloudy one day, don't worry about it, though.
- **Keep a close eye on delicate plants.** Heat-loving plants like peppers and eggplants should be watched carefully for signs of stress. Don't forget to continually check the forecast to prevent leaving your sensitive plants outside overnight.
- **Don't forget to water!** Water your plants to prevent them from wilting, but don't [water](#) as frequently as you might have when they were indoors.
- **Start on a weekend.** Even better, on a long weekend. The first few days your plants shouldn't be exposed to direct sunlight or crazy weather. It's best if you're home to watch them and bring them in if need be.
- **Transplant starts into the garden after about a week or so.** Water and mulch to conserve moisture.
- **Monitor your plants to watch for signs of stress and transplant shock.** If your seedlings wilt and die, something has gone wrong in the process. You may have rushed things.

## Pro tip for hardening off

**Mistakes will happen.** I've killed many plants during the hardening off process. If you're new to this, harden off a few plants at a time, so you don't accidentally wipe out your entire set of starts at once.

**Be patient and communicate with other household members.** Let your family, partner, or housemates know that you're hardening off your plants. Explain how it works and how long it will take. Give everyone a heads up that the kitchen or entryway may be a bit cluttered for a week and that you may even need

help bringing plants in and out each day.

**Keep seed starting.** Don't stop starting seeds just because it's time to harden off the majority of your seedlings. Succession sowing (and transplanting) allows you to always have new plants to fill empty spaces in the garden. One thing I've learned over the years is that immediately planting every square foot in my garden isn't necessarily the best use of my time. Instead, I plant a few squares, wait a week, and plant (or transplant) more. That way, I don't have 6 heads of lettuce or 5 squares of bok choy all maturing at once. A [staggered harvest](#) is much more manageable.

## A confession

I don't always stick to my schedule or tried and true methods. Sometimes, my impatience gets the best of me and sometimes I succeed at avoiding the whole rigamarole, but often it leaves me frustrated and disappointed that I've lost seedlings. I've learned from many mistakes, but my hatred for the hardening off process seems to override any sense and every lesson I've learned goes out the window when I'm eager to get the garden started.

Not everyone hardens off their plants the same way. Do you have a method that works for you? Do you hate the process as much as I do? Let me know by commenting on this post!

Excuse me while I go place my collards and kale on a tray to start the hardening off process. Wish me luck!

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# Seed Starting on a Budget Series: Avoid These 5 Mistakes



You're bound to mess up at some point or another in your gardening life. That's fine. I've made plenty of errors in the ten or so years that I've been a gardener. Much that I've learned is the result of messing up. I love that I'm able to experiment in my garden, and if I were afraid to bungle things, I'd be reluctant to try new techniques and methods.

That doesn't mean, though, that you should *always* make mistakes. With a little bit of knowledge in your pocket, there are some messes you can altogether avoid. Don't make these five mistakes.



## 5 Mistakes to Avoid When Starting Seeds

- **Overwatering:** I think watering is one of the most critical tasks that gardeners seem to screw up so often. We're terrible at hydrating ourselves, so it's not that surprising that we have trouble figuring out when and how much to water our plants. We forget that different plants have different needs, too. Seedlings require moisture but add too much water, and you'll encourage mold growth and potentially end up drowning your baby plants. Stick your finger in the soil to feel whether it's too dry.
- **Leaving seedlings in small containers:** Potting up seedlings is an annoying task, but waiting to transfer seedlings to larger containers may spell disaster. Leaving vigorous plants in pots that are too small will render them root bound. You'll stress your plants and stifle their growth. With the right timing, some plants don't need to be transplanted while they're still indoors. My lettuce seedlings, for instance, will be ready to go out before their too big for their original containers. Tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers, however, won't be happy relegated to mini pots once they've grown several inches tall.
- **Forgetting to harden off seedlings:** I think every gardener has made this mistake, and it's a costly one. You start your seedlings indoors, you do everything right, and then it's time to set them outside. You transplant your healthy starts on a gorgeous, sunny day and admire your hard work. The next morning, you head to your garden to check on your plants, and you find that nearly all of them have toppled over, dead or almost dead. What happened? Those plants weren't adequately hardened off. Plants need to adjust to the change in conditions before being thrown into the wild. *I'll be covering the process of hardening off in detail in the coming weeks, so check back for more info soon!*

- **Using too many seeds:** This is especially important for frugal gardeners. Stop tossing all your seeds into plant trays! There's no reason to waste an entire packet to start seedlings. All that's needed is for one single seed to sprout and flourish. Of course, not all seeds sprout, but using a whole packet is wasteful and unnecessary. Instead, plant two or three seeds per cell or pot. Using fewer seeds means you'll have leftovers for next season and thinning will be a much easier process.
- **Ignoring the forecast:** Don't become obsessed with your last frost date. It's just a guideline. And stop comparing your gardening progress to others. That gardener on Instagram who's just transplanted her tomatoes? They're in a completely different zone! Instead of waiting impatiently for the last frost date to come and go, keep a close eye on the weather forecast. Look carefully at the predicted highs and lows for the daytime and overnight. Becoming an expert in weather watching is an incredibly useful skill for the eager gardener. It's not enough to look outside and see whether it's sunny or raining. Knowing what's coming allows you to be prepared. If a sudden frost arrives after the last frost day, you can take measures to protect your tender transplants.

These aren't, by any means, the only mistakes you don't want to make as a gardener. But I think they're important and relatively easy to avoid.

I sincerely hope everyone is enjoying the warmer days as springtime advances. I've already planted a variety of greens and look forward to beginning the transplanting process for my cabbage starts.

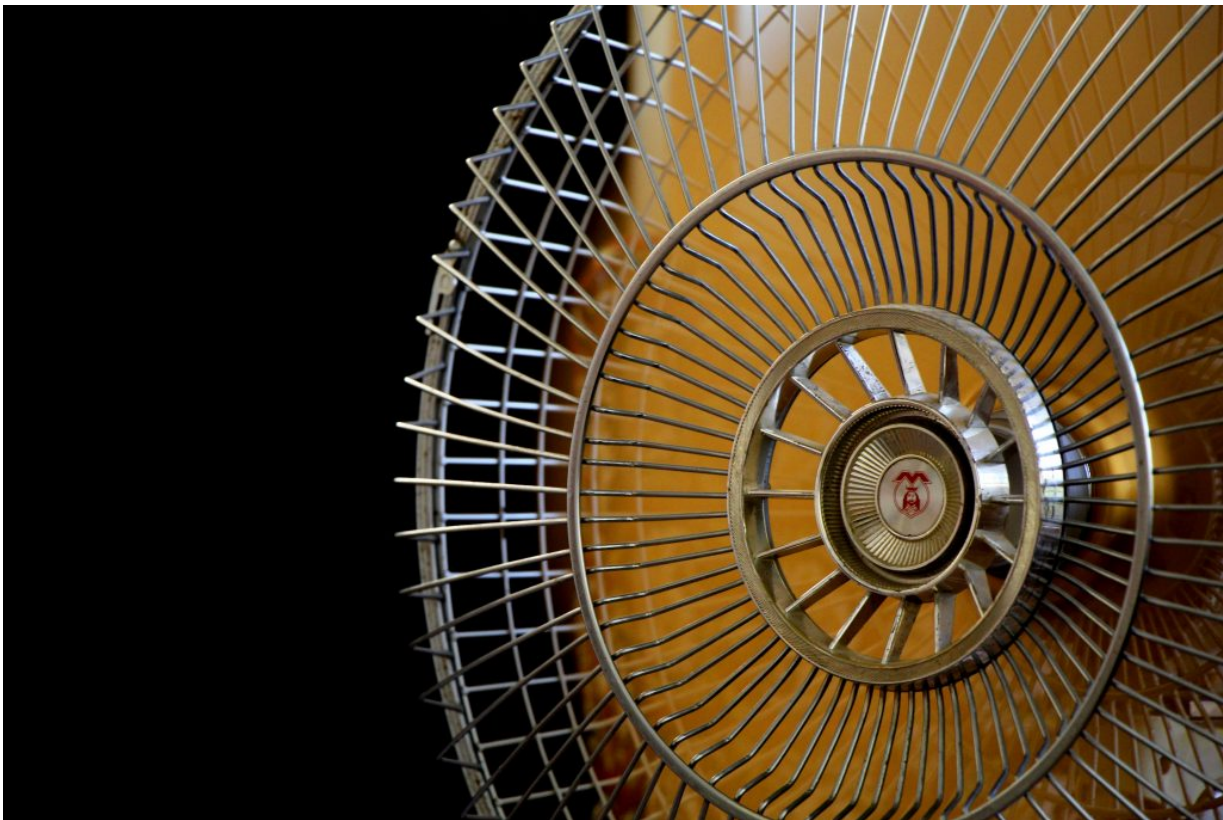
Don't forget to leave a comment below to let me know what you'd like to see me write about. I'm happy to answer questions about anything! Even if it's something, I don't know

anything about. I always love to research and learn more about the plant world.

Happy Monday and happy gardening!

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## Seed Starting Series: Air Circulation



Frugal gardeners can't afford to leave a lot to chance during the seed starting process. Failed starts means wasted time, effort, and money. While failure happens more often than I'd like sometimes, I always find a way to learn from my mistakes. Otherwise, what's the point? Sometimes, it's out of our hands. But, if my seedlings don't thrive and I have the power to change the situation for next time, I'll do my best to make necessary changes.

This past weekend, I had to toss out nearly a full tray of tomato seedlings because they were not growing well at all. I can't be one-hundred percent certain but I think the issue may have been the seeds themselves since the rest of the tray was filled with tomatillos and those were looking lovely.

I've also noticed a lot more surface mold than usual on the seed starting mix and wondered if that might be the issue. Again, I don't think so, since the tomatillos are thriving and my eggplants are looking healthy, too. Still, it made me realize that I needed to rectify the mold growth issue.

Signs of mold on your soil isn't always a big deal. Often, excess mold growth is a sign of overwatering, but the fungus or mold is unlikely to cause any harm. In my case, I think the issue is poor air circulation and being too slow to remove the clear plastic domes on my trays. Always remove the domes at the first sign of germination. This requires regular inspections of your trays, though, which is tough if you're having a busy week. I suggest making it a habit to check on your trays at least once a day.

I'm a somewhat laissez-faire gardener, but I wanted to find a way to encourage better air circulation in my growing space and prevent excess humidity, without needing to shell out lots of money. So yesterday, I did two things:

**Turned up the heat:** The basement is colder than other parts of my home. That's true for most basement spaces. A basement is often a popular place for seed starting since it's out of the way and not typically as highly trafficked as other parts of a home. The problem is that basements are often cooler and more humid than upstairs spaces. Thankfully, we have a baseboard heater close to the grow shelves. It's not usually on, but I decided to crank up the heat. Humidity isn't inherently bad for your seedlings. In fact, most plants enjoy humidity, but excess levels may lead to mold and fungal growth.



**Plugged in a cheap oscillating fan:** I've actually been meaning to do this for a while now, but the fan was hidden away in our crawl space, and I couldn't be bothered to go hunting for it. I knew I would be in for a situation where something would definitely fall on my head. So I asked my husband to do it. He managed to get it out in a snap, and it's been blowing air around my grow space for a few days now.

## Why is a fan useful?

There are a few reasons to consider adding a fan to your indoor grow space. Even if you're just starting some seedlings along a windowsill. Oscillating fans are also inexpensive, so frugal gardeners don't have to worry about making a huge dent in their budget. Once the seed starting season is over, you can use the fan to circulate air elsewhere in your house and to keep you cool on very hot days. For your seedlings, adding a fan can:

- Reduce fungal growth
- Strengthen your seedlings
- Keeps leaves dry
- Helps prevent disease

**Tip:** Set your fan to the lowest setting and not too close to seedlings. Too strong an air current may stress your seedlings. Give them a break at night and save power, by shutting off the fan before you head to bed.

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## Troubleshooting the Seed

# Starting Process: Using Old Seeds

I'm typing this up on a gloomy day here in Zone 5, Canada. In the past week, I've experienced an impromptu snowstorm, a city-wide power outage, and then a bright sunny Saturday where the temps went up to 16 degrees Celcius. It's been a wacky week. I had been excited to sow quick-growing cool-season crops outdoors on Sunday, but the weather decided it had other plans. It's been rainy for a whole two days, and I'm not sure when it's going to stop. I had to throw away my cracked and broken 10-year-old rainboots last year. I think it's time to invest in another pair!

I received another great question that I'd like to tackle this week.

***Can I use last years seeds? I bought a bunch of seeds at my hardware store for half off. Will there be any problems germinating?***

The short and sweet answer is yes! You can't most definitely use last year's seeds. Most seed packets feature a sell-by date that should give you an indication of how fresh (or not fresh) they are. The key to keeping seeds fresh and viable for years down the road is proper storage. An airtight container is the best home for leftover or saved seeds.

I used to keep my seeds in mini petri dishes I purchased for cheap on eBay, but they were hard to open, and I often lost track of their original seed packets. I then started storing packets in an airtight container, but I didn't like that there was no way to keep different varieties of seed separate. Then, I spotted a genius storage idea on a fellow gardener's Instagram stories. Deanna from [Homestead and Chill](#) had the brilliant idea of using a craft storage case to categorize and

organize her seed packets. It keeps everything tidy, and I no longer have to worry about losing seed packets.



You may have some trouble germinating old seeds if they haven't been stored correctly and some seeds stay fresher longer than others. If you're not sure if any of the seeds are viable? Germinate them before planting, so you can be sure you're not planting duds. Place seeds on a damp paper towel and place inside a ziplock bag. Depending on the seeds in question, in a few days or so, you'll have an idea as to whether the seeds are still good to go.

I did this recently with a seed packet full of pepper seeds. I had no clue how old the packet was and didn't want to waste

tray space trying to germinate pepper seeds that would never grow, so I laid them out on a slightly wet paper towel to see what came up. Very few ended up germinating, likely from a combo of being very old and poor storage.

*What are your favorite ways to store seeds? Have you ever tried to pre-germinate seeds and did it help with your seed starting efforts?*

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## Seed Starting on a Budget

### Series:           Watering           your Seedlings



Plants need water to survive. There's no doubt about it.



Moisture is a requirement throughout a plant's lifecycle. Some are better at handling drought conditions than others, but seedlings are especially sensitive to significant fluctuations in moisture levels. Too much variation will stress your baby plants.

Proper watering will produce sturdy seedlings and prevent loss. If you don't water enough, drown your seedlings or wait too long between waterings, you may just watch all your effort go down the drain.

## Tips for keeping your thirsty seedlings happy

Everyone has a different way of approaching the seed starting process, but here are some tried and true tips for watering your seedlings.

- **Water from below.** My seed starting setup includes sturdy, deep trays where I set flats or coco coir pellets. Once seedlings have popped through the soil, I shallow-fill the tray with water. Watering from below helps prevent disease development, and I've found it encourages strong root growth. I'm also less likely to drown the tiny plants this way.
- **Watch the temperature.** Don't water with scalding hot or ice cold water as it can stress your seedlings. Opt for lukewarm or room temp water for watering.
- **Soak the soil.** Before planting seeds in soil mix, make sure the soil is wet. Watering once you've popped in seeds is tougher and may cause small seeds to migrate to other cells in a flat.

## Check on seedlings often

Keep to a schedule and make it part of your routine to take a peek at your seedlings at least once a day. You'll notice right away if there's anything wrong and you're more likely to

remember to water consistently.

Thankfully, proper watering doesn't require any additional spending. Consistency and diligence will get your plants where they need to be!

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## Seed Starting on a Budget Series: Choosing What to Grow



Browsing a seed catalog or shopping at a local plant nursery can be overwhelming. Especially for a new gardener! I still have a tough time making selections. With so many choices, it's hard not to go overboard. When I'm purchasing seeds, I try to consider my space and needs so I can maximize returns. I also often fill up my basket and walk away from my computer

before finalizing my order. It's easy to get caught up in the moment and overestimate both my garden's capacity and the amount of room I have for seed starting. Have you found yourself stressing about what to plant? Today I want to try to make the planning process easier for you.

## Make a plan

Before buying your seeds or starter plants. Make a rough [garden plan](#). You'll have an estimate of the amount of space available for planting. I use the Square Foot Gardening method, so I always have an idea of how many square feet are available. I sketch out my beds, divide them into square feet, and decided what to plant in each square. With proper planning, I know what I need to start indoors. For example this year, I'm dedicating one square foot to leeks. Using the SFG method, leeks should be planted 9 per square foot, so I've got at least nine leek seedlings growing. I also always start a few extra, just in case.

If I hadn't done any planning, I might have started too many seedlings and found myself scrambling to make room for leftover plants. Luckily, this year I'm donating any extras to our local community garden.

If you're working within a limited space, like a balcony, count up the number of pots you have or plan to use before you start growing or purchasing seedlings.

## How do I narrow down my planting choices?

### Sunlight

Now that you know how much space you're working with, consider the amount of sunlight that shines upon your growing space.

How many hours of sunlight does your garden receive? 6-8 hours is ideal. Less than 6 hours of sun typically means the area is partially shaded. You can still grow plants in low sunlight, but growth will be slower, and not all plants will thrive without full sun (e.g., tomatoes).

### **Working with a super sunny area?**

In the summer, you may want to use shade cloth to protect greens like lettuce because heat will cause certain plants to bolt and go to seed. In the very hot sun, greens may also experience leaf burn. Mulching to conserve moisture is crucial. You may also plant heat-sensitive crops close to larger, leafy vegetables for shade. In full sun, you'll have success with eggplant, tomatoes, peppers, and squash.

### **Shade tolerant veggies**

Note that the use of the word *tolerant*. Temper your expectations when working in a shaded or partially shaded area. Don't expect to grow big juicy tomatoes if your garden gets less than 4 hours of sunlight. I have experience gardening in a well-shaded area. The biggest issue is that growth is extremely slow. The advantage? In the thick of the hot summer, it's easier to grow lettuce, spinach, and Asian greens. Here are a few examples of vegetables you can grow in partial shade:

- Carrots
- Radishes
- Chard
- Parsley
- Lettuce
- [Kale](#)
- Mustards
- Mizuna
- Pac Choi
- Broccoli

## **Your dinner plate**

I'm a big proponent of choosing vegetables and plants that will make their way onto your dinner plate. Don't grow stuff you don't like to eat unless you plan to trade it with other gardeners. I don't love cucumbers. I find them boring, and plants always produce way more than I can eat, so I don't typically grow them. What's the point? I'd rather use the space to grow something I love to eat! My favorite veggies include bok choy, kale, eggplant, and carrots. I eat these veggies the most, so I make sure I have plenty of growing space for them.

## **Which plants are the easiest to grow and which are the toughest?**

I hear this question a lot, and I'd say it depends. A lot of people find it easy to grow tomatoes. I find they're a lot of work and often produce way more than I can eat in a season. It's possible to preserve them, but that involves extra labor.

Radishes grow super quickly, and some varieties are ready to harvest in less than a month. But your success with radishes may depend on your soil composition.

Lettuce is easy to grow, but in climates with sweltering summers can bolt quickly and turn bitter before you even have a chance to harvest the leaves.

Spinach is another low-maintenance quick growing green, but in my climate, if I don't sow seeds early, plants go to seed before I even realize they're ready to eat.

I've had great luck with eggplants, but it's true that they're finicky.

Difficulty level depends on many factors, and you may find



that the easiest vegetables to grow are the ones you enjoy eating because the harvest is so rewarding. Plan your garden according to your palette, and it'll be that much more fun to nurture the plants within.