

Starting Seeds vs. Transplants in the Vegetable Garden

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If you have a vegetable garden, you are probably already thinking about what warm-season crops will go into your spring garden. Spring is a great time for tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, squash and many other favorites. Vegetable gardens can be an expensive hobby for some, but others have mastered the way to get the most for their money. Seeds are one cost-saver, and this article will tell you the pros and cons of starting your own seeds versus using transplants.

Although some plants can be planted directly in the garden using seeds, such as beans, peas and squash, others need to be planted using transplants like tomatoes and peppers. When you buy local transplants, you have only a few varieties to choose from and you pay a premium compared to the low cost of seeds.

In the seed catalogues, there are many varieties to choose from. If you want to try growing a black tomato or white eggplant, you can easily order seeds and grow your own. There are many fun options.

You also can grow seeds based on the previous history of your garden. If certain varieties work well for you, then you may want to stick with those. On the other hand, if you had disease problems, then you may want to grow cultivars with disease resistance. In our demonstration garden, we had a problem with root-knot nematodes, so I am going to make sure that our tomato and pepper starts are nematode resistant for the ones I am planting in the ground and not a container.

If you are looking for heirlooms seeds or organic varieties, seed saver groups such as the Southern Heritage Seed Collective provides seeds for a donation of \$20 per season which can be picked up at various collection sites. These cultivars have been tested by local growers and known to do well in the area. You also can save your own seeds from these varieties since they are open-pollinated compared to hybrid varieties, saving even more money.

Often there are many seeds in a packet. If you have small garden, you may only want a few of each plant. With the extra seeds, you can store them in a cool, dry place like the refrigerator or freezer, just make sure they are dry. You also can trade extra seeds with friends and neighbors. Groups such as Seed Savers in High Springs and Grow Gainesville, as well as many others, commonly trade seeds amongst each other.

Starting seeds also allows you to be less dependent on the nurseries although there is a learning curve to raising your plants from seed.

Some of the cons to growing from seeds are time, space, materials required, the possibility of loss, and timing. The seeds take several weeks to grow and that means that you will have to water them daily and tend to them. You need certain materials such as trays or containers, domes and soil, as well as a grow light or

greenhouse. Starting seeds may take some practice and losing some or all is always a possibility. For more information on growing from seed, you can find some basics on this EDIS article, "Starting the Garden with Transplants," at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh027>.

This is normally the time to start tomatoes and peppers since you want to grow them 6-8 weeks before the last frost, which averages March 10 in Alachua County. The package of seeds will often tell you how many weeks before the last frost to grow your seeds. You don't want to start them too late or it will get too hot when your tomatoes start producing.

If this process seems too difficult or you have waited too long to start your seeds, you always have the option of buying transplants. Many local nurseries have healthy transplants ready to be planted.