Saving Money by Growing from Seed

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Have you ever looked at one of those seed packets in the store and wondered what to do with them? There is so much potential in one little seed packet to make so many plants with the low cost of a few bucks. Imagine having plants ready to go into the garden at the first frost free date in your area. By growing your own transplants from seeds indoors, you can have a head start on the growing season and you don't need a fancy greenhouse to do it.

One benefit of starting directly from seed is that you have greater variety and sources from which to choose. In addition to going into a store, you can go on the internet, order from a catalog, or swap seeds with others at a local garden club. It's important to buy good seed from a reliable dealer in order to grow vigorous plants with a high germination rate. In order to not be overwhelmed by the multitude of varieties, check out the Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide, http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021, for the recommended varieties.

If possible, purchase enough seed for only one year's worth since germination decreases with age. If you do have leftover seeds, you can store them in the original packet in a cool, dry place or in the freezer. Determine where they will be placed in the garden, how many plants you will need, and when you should start the seeds. The packet will say how many weeks before the last frost date to start your seed. The average last frost date in Gainesville is March 10th.

Choose your container. This can be store-bought plastic cell packs, peat pots, foam cubes, or anything around the house like egg cartons, milk cartons, or yogurt cups to name a few. Provide drainage holes if there aren't any and wash used containers in a 10% bleach solution.

Fill the container to within about ½ inch from the top with moistened, sterile growing medium such as a potting soil that is designed for seed-starting. Plant your seeds to the depth that the seed package recommends which is usually 2 to 3 times the seed diameter. Tiny seeds can be pressed into the medium or sprinkled on top if they require light to germinate. Plant at least 3 seeds per container since not all the seeds will germinate and extras can be thinned out later.

After the seeds are planted, label the pots with the type of seed and date, water them by misting them or bottom watering, and immediately cover the containers until the seeds germinate. They can be covered with plastic covers, glass, or saran

wrap. Try to keep the growing temperature at 60 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and above 50 degrees during the night. Bottom heat can help germination but too much heat, once germinated, can cause leggy plants.

Once they have germinated, remove the cover and keep the seedlings 1 to 3 inches below a fluorescent light bulb or grow light for 14 to 18 hours a day. An automatic timer is helpful for this because you want to be consistent. You can make your own grow light for under $30 with a two-lamp shop light fixture and some PVC pipe if you are handy. To prevent damping off, a fungal disease that attacks seedlings, maintain good air circulation such as with a small fan at low speed.

When true leaves form, fertilize the seedlings at ¼ the recommended strength. When two sets of true leaves form, it's time to transplant seedlings into individual pots if they were started in flats. Dig them out gently by holding the leaves, not the stem. Before planting your seedlings in the garden, harden them by gradually by exposing them to outside growing conditions for a week or so.

If you want to try growing seeds, you still have time to start. If you need help, there are many resources for details including http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/ and your local county extension office.

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