



GROWING SEEDLINGS FOR CASH

I graduated from the Seedling Planters School of Hard Knocks—Class of 2014. This year I'm growing at least 25 Brandywine Heirloom Seedlings as well as 175 other vegetable seedlings for the *April Loving Garland Green Plant Sale*.

While some are still mooning over the seed catalogs, others of us already have our seeds in hand. We are eager to launch those specks of hope into seedlings to transplant in our gardens or even to sell. And no wonder! A well-kept secret is that people can make money by selling seedlings. If, for example, you were to grow 1,000 seedlings (not that difficult she says) and sold them for \$2 each at a seed yard sale on your front lawn-- well, what fool wouldn't purchase a plant for \$2 that would cost them \$4 to \$5 down the street at a chain store?

When should you start seedlings?

How big do you want your plants to be when transplanted? If you start seed 5 to 8 weeks before transplanting to the garden, your seedlings can grow in seed flats and will be about 10 inches tall at transplanting time. If you start 8 to 12 weeks early, then plan to grow them in pots up to 12 inches diameter.

Transplanting time for setting tomatoes out in the garden in North Central Texas is between March 20 and April 30 according to our Texas AgriLife Extension Service. I was always told by my grandparents to plant after Easter. Easter for 2015 falls on April 5. I will be planting my tomatoes sometime after that date and before April 15.

This article presents a few tips for beginners (which I was last year so these disappointments are still fresh in my mind). Nearly all my seedlings sprouted, but soon withered and died. Now, after a little more education, I figured out what I did wrong. I used the best organic soil I could find to plant them in.

#1 TIP: ONLY USE A SEED START SOIL MIX THAT HAS BEEN PREPARED FOR THAT PURPOSE AND THAT HAS BEEN STERILIZED.

Gardening or potting soil contains organisms that will love to feed on seeds—especially your juicy tomato seeds. There are all kinds of commercial seed mixes on the market to choose from. However, if you don't like to use the commercial stuff, and are willing to do a little more work, you can make your own sterile mix for planting your seeds.

Here is how I'm sterilizing my seed mix:

- 1) Fill a cake pan with rich compost that I've screened.
- 2) Fill a pot with about half inch of water.
- 3) Put the cake pan in the water.
- 4) Cover the pot with a lid.
- 5) Bring to a boil and then turn down the heat and simmer for 30 minutes.

The heat and steam will kill the organisms.

After it's cooled, I'll mix a little perlite into the soil. There will be enough nutrients to last about 3 weeks after germination as is with most seed start mixes. After that, as needed, I'll apply some weakened alpaca manure tea (one cup to five gallons).

#2 TIP: DON'T USE THOSE JIFFY POTS!

They are the worst excuse for a plant pot. When planted in your garden, most of them don't break down fast enough to allow the roots of the plant to escape. Furthermore these pots dry out at a much faster rate than the typical plastic growing pot. If you are more or less a casual gardener as I am, your seedlings may die of thirst before they even make it to the garden.

If you insist on using them and can keep your seedling alive long enough for it to make it to the garden, then do the plant a favor by removing it from the pot before planting it. The ironic thing about these pots is the more expensive they are (the ones that contain coconut and coir fiber) the more indestructible they are. I don't know what the half-life of coconut and coir fiber is, but it may be longer than that of the radioisotopes in a nuclear reactor.

#3 TIP: KEEP SEEDLINGS WARM

It is a good idea to keep seedlings covered until the seeds germinate. It's also a good idea to keep them in a room that is about 72 degrees F. You can buy one of those start heat mats. I might use a heating pad that I already have. **Caution:** This is an experiment. I plan to cover the heating pad with a heavy towel and then a sheet of vinyl over that to insure the heating pad does not get wet. I'll check often when on to ensure it is not making things too hot for the seedlings.

#4 TIP: PLENTY OF SUNLIGHT

Some folks go so far as to purchase grow lights. I can't afford that so I'm making a clear plastic tent over one of my raised beds that I'll bring the seedlings out to when

the weather is at least 50 degrees F and sunny. Then I'll take them back into the house for the night.

#5 TIP: DON'T SPEND MONEY ON POTS AND SEEDLING TRAYS

Of course, if you have it, spend it and help to grow the local economy for the rest of us. But if you are pinching pennies, drive around the more affluent neighborhoods in Garland. On just about any given Monday or Tuesday you will be sure to find some pots curbside that someone has thrown away. In November of last year, I got over 300 seedling pots –all in trays too—at one home. They are perfect. I will use them to plant the seedlings I hope to grow with success this year for Loving Garland Green's first seedling sale ever in April down at the Garden.

#6 TIP: PROPER FEEDING FOR SEEDLINGS

About three weeks after germination, you will need to feed your seedlings. If you used a commercial mix, it may have enough extra nutrients to take a tomato plant to the four-leaf stage. Other mixes do not contain any extra nutrients. You can tell by looking at your seedling if it needs to be fed. If needed, you can water your seedlings with one level teaspoon of a liquid mix of 15-30-15 fertilizer in a gallon of water. Or you can make alpaca manure tea (one cup in a sock steeped in a five gallon bucket for 3 days). Once a week feeding should be more than enough.

#7 TIP: GERMINATE SEEDS BEFORE PLANTING IN MEDIUM

This is the method I plan to follow because I like to know what I'm getting:

- 1) Moisten a paper towel
- 2) Wring it out
- 3) Spread it out.
- 4) Place seed on towel.
- 5) Loosely fold over.
- 6) Put in Ziploc bag.
- 7) Put in warm place and continue to check every two days until germinated and then plant in seed mix.

If all else fails, follow the advice of some real experts: <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/landscape/starting-seedlings-at-home>