



UCCE Master Gardeners of Lake Tahoe

Vegetable Growing Tips-- Starting with Seeds

Growing vegetables can be fun! It also can be very frustrating. But in any case, growing vegetables provides a wonderful learning experience for us as we learn from our successes and mistakes.

In Tahoe we have a very short growing season which can make it ever more difficult to grow vegetables. Cool evenings linger through the spring and we can always get a cool snap in the fall that can harm the plants right before they bare the fruits of your labor. As a Tahoe veggie gardener start some of your seeds indoors to jump start your season and to ensure there is enough growing season for you to receive a yield from crops.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when growing vegetables from seed:

Seed selection - We have a short growing season in Lake Tahoe seed selection matters. To increase your chances of success we recommend selecting seeds that have a shorter days to harvest/maturity, determinate lengths, are frost tolerant (if possible), and seeds derived from high altitude plants (if possible). These are just recommendations! You will also have success with many other types of seeds but to increase your chances these are just a few suggestions.

Growing Medium - Seeds should be started in a very light mix. Good seed starting mix can be found at many of the local stores and is very inexpensive. You can also make your own!

Trays and Lids - Almost any container can be used to start seeds including milk or egg cartons, plastic berry trays, salad trays or the pre-made grow trays with dome lids. Whatever medium you choose to grow your plants in make sure that it has been cleaned out and has proper drainage. To ensure soil moisture cover your containers with a clear lid or clear plastic wrap helps retain soil moisture and increase humidity during germination.

Heat Mat - For many plant varieties, heat can really help the germination process, and a heat mat will heat the soil to help the process along. If you use one, just be sure to keep the plastic dome lid or other type of clear cover on while the seeds are germinating to trap the moisture and heat. Once the seedlings are up and roots have been established, the heat mat should be turned off to prevent the roots from burning. The dome or clear cover should also be removed to allow the soil to begin to dry out slightly.

Grow Lights - Using a growing light can significantly speed up the growing process. If you use one, be sure to keep the light very close to the seedlings (approximately 1-3 inches) to prevent them from becoming leggy. As the plants grow, raise the light up slightly to accommodate growth. Keep in mind that different plants will grow at different rates, so it is best to keep plants that will grow at the same rate under one light. (For example, don't grow green beans that grow tall quickly, with zucchini that will stay shorter for a long period.) The light should be left on about 16 hours a day.

Transplanting Seedlings - Once true leaves are established, that is the time to transplant seedlings into a large pot. When transplanting, be sure to provide a liquid fertilizer. There are many good options available on the market. Feed your plants a light dose of this fertilizer about every 10-14 days through the growing process.

Hardening Off - It is critical that you "harden off" any plants that are started indoors. Begin by placing your plants outside in the shade, gradually moving them into more light. It is also very important that plants have an opportunity to sway in light wind to help strengthen their stems. You can also place the plants in front of a fan indoors to help with this process.

A few things to consider... plants can fail, birds or other animals can discover your seedlings or plants and destroy them, or a pest can take over. These things are beyond disappointing but we hope you still find the fun in the growing process!