



Starting Seeds Is Fun and Easy!
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Once we are headed into fall, and our gardens have been pruned and mulched and tucked into bed for the winter, it's time to curl up on the couch with a seed catalog and dream. I have quite a few packets of seeds already, but I don't let that stop me from ordering more. Sure, you can go to your local nursery and buy baby plants for your garden, and I certainly do that as well, but the fun of starting plants from seed, for me, is a combination of a few things. There is the diversity of vegetables and flowers that are available — the weird and wonderful varieties that you just can't find at the nursery. And there is the excitement when the seeds germinate; when they poke their little heads out of the ground and stretch upward, I do a mental fist pump. And later, I feel a great sense of accomplishment when I eat a tomato that I started from seed.

If you haven't started seeds before, I encourage you to give it a try. You don't need a lot of fancy stuff to get started (although you can, of course, find lots of that too). Some seeds are easy to germinate and others take more patience and care. I love planting lettuce in a wide pot in the fall and early spring. There are many lettuce blends available and those work great. Leaf lettuce is the easiest place to start. Scatter some seeds on top of the soil — don't bury them as they need light to germinate. Keep them moist — the act of watering will splash a tiny bit of soil on top of the seeds and they will be happy. Once they are up and growing, you can snip off your very own baby lettuce mix by giving your plants a haircut. They'll keep growing and you will have your own spring lettuce mix for salads.

Another easy vegetable to start is tomatoes. They come in all shapes, sizes and colors. In February or March, you can plant a few seeds in a small pot (or two or three pots). Most tomato varieties germinate easily. The seed catalog will give you the number of days for germination and also the time from germination to when the tomatoes are ripe. I'm in the Placerville area which has a relatively short growing season, so I chose varieties with a short growing period. If you chose a variety that takes longer, you may not be harvesting tomatoes until September.

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What do you need? Some pots, or small containers with holes poked in the bottom, a packet of seeds, some seed starting mix, and a sunny window. Seeds don't like to be cold so make sure you start them in a warm, bright, sheltered place. Commercial seed starting mix has just the right amount of fluff and water retention properties to help you succeed. Don't use soil from your garden as it will be too dense and may harbor bacteria. If you don't have a sunny location, you can start the seeds under a fluorescent light. Some seeds do better planted directly in the ground in the spring or early summer when the ground warms up. This article provides more information about what seeds do best started in pots and which are better directly sown in your garden, http://napamg.ucanr.edu/Seed_Starting/.

Make sure you read the instructions on the back of your seed packets to ensure that you are successful. More information on starting seeds can be found here: <http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/Vegetables/?uid=9&ds=462>.

Good luck and happy gardening!

Attached Photo: by UCCE Master Gardener Lori Jagoda of Napa County; cabbage seedlings.