

HOME & GARDEN

Start seeds early — indoors

By PAT LEUCHTMAN
Recorder Columnist

BETWEEN THE ROWS

It is possible to wait until Memorial Day weekend to start the season's garden if you are content to let the local nursery pick out your vegetable and flower varieties for you. But if you want a wide variety of plants or particular varieties that are not commonly available, it is time to start preparing to grow your own seedlings.

This is a happy time of year for me because I am always eager to begin those first spring gardening chores. I'd have to admit that my enthusiasm has been known to flag when faced with a plethora of August weeds, but energy knows no bounds while gathering my peats, Jiffy-mix and little wooden flat markers.

The first thing to do is assemble the materials. I am partial to fiberboard boxes (they look like overground berry cartons) that I can fill with Jiffy-mix, a soil-less seedling mix, or a commercial potting soil mixed with vermiculite. I then water the planting medium well, and plant the seeds carefully, spacing them out so that I will be able to transplant them later. After the seeds are planted I sprinkle them with a little more of the planting medium. They should be watered gently. I use the plastic spray bottle I have for ironing, so that the seeds don't wash around.

This is only one way to start, of course, although the basic planting instructions remain the same. Some people prefer to build wooden flats that will last for many years. If this project appeals to you, remember that the boxes should be at least 4 inches deep, and they should not be so large that they will be difficult to move when filled with soil. They can become very heavy.

A fairly new system for planting seeds involves "Speeding" flats. This styrofoam flat is divided into many cells in the shape of an inverted pyramid. There is a small hole in the bottom of each cell that is supposed to "air prune" the tap root of each seed-

ling. This will promote the development of extra feeder roots that are so important in maintaining plant vigor when the seedling is transplanted. Also the tapered shape of the cell makes removal of the seedling very easy.

These flats measure about 26x13 inches and contain either 200, 128 or 72 cells, depending on the size. Speeding flats require a small investment; Johnny's Selected Seeds (Albion, Maine 04910) sells them for between \$21.95 and \$24.95 for a package of four or five flats, but they will last for a number of seasons.

When the seeds germinate and get their first set of true leaves, I transplant them from the flat into individual peat pots that will give the roots more room to develop. Always make sure to water the transplants thoroughly, but do not be so generous that the peat pots remain waterlogged, or you can encourage root rot.

With a little luck and care the seedlings will thrive, and soon it will be time to prepare them for the final move into the garden. Seedlings cannot be moved directly from the warm and protected environment of the house to the mercy of the elements — wind, sun and rain — in one fell swoop.

About two weeks before seedlings are to be set into the garden they must be hardened off. This means they can be moved to a cold frame. Here they will be exposed to greater fluctuations in temperature and greater intensity of sunlight, but they will still be protected and sheltered.

If you do not have a cold frame, the seedlings should be put outdoors in a sheltered spot for longer and longer periods each day and brought in at night. It also helps to cut down on the watering.

When the seedlings have been hard-

ened off, they can be moved into a well-prepared garden bed. Try to do this on a cloudy day or at the end of the day so that the plant has a little time to settle in before facing the full strength of the sun. Water them well.

Tomatoes, peppers and eggplants should be started indoors about 10 or 12 weeks before they will be set out into the garden and around here that date is usually Memorial Day weekend or just after.

The cold crops — cabbage, cauliflower and broccoli — grow more quickly and only need to be started about six or seven weeks before setting out in the garden. Also, they are much harder than tomatoes and can go into a rich, well-prepared garden bed earlier in May. Because they prefer a rich soil it is a good practice to dig 2 or 3 inches of rotted manure or compost into the soil about two weeks before transplanting the seedlings.

Melons and pumpkins are other crops that can be started indoors — perhaps a month before the seedlings can go into the garden. These are very tender plants and should only be set out when the weather is settled and warm. They do not like to have their roots disturbed at all, so these seeds should be planted in individual peat pots or peat pellets right from the start. If using peat pellets, remember to let them drain off and dry out a little (for several hours) after they have been soaked and have puffed up to their full size. This will help insure that the seed does not rot before germinating.

Some annual flowers also need a head start indoors early in the year. Generally the same rules hold for planting flowers, but there are exceptions. Some seeds like snapdragons, impatiens, coleus and petunias need light to germinate, so it is important to remember not to cover them with planting medium.

There may be snow on the ground, but there is no denying that spring has slowly begun to arrive. By planting seeds indoors early, it will get a big boost on its way.

How to force blossoms from twigs

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Cut a 5 x 1/4 inch slit

On branches over one inch in diameter, scrape the outer bark for six inches

upright growth
slanting growth
cascade growth

Cut branches on a sharp slant

Place branches in container according to their natural growth. Water should always be warm and changed daily.

Plants easy to force
Wild and hybrid pussy willow
Weeping willow
Witch hazel
Forsythia
Spirea
Flowering quince
Shadbush

— Massachusetts Cooperative Extension Service

Here's the answer

By ANDY LANG
AP Newsfeatures

Q. — I bought a second-hand piano some time ago. The humidity in our house usually is very low and things have a habit of drying out. That's probably what happened to the ivory on the keys. How do I get them to stay on? Also, is there any way of getting the yellow off?

A. — By coincidence, a new Yankee Magazine Home Fix-It book discusses that subject. The comment applies exactly to your problem: "To clean the ivories, try any of the following: denatured alcohol, yogurt or a solution of whiting powder found in paint stores. Avoid getting the whiting solution between the keys. To secure the ivories to the keys, sand off any old glue from the ivories and from the keys. Apply a thin coat of contact cement to both parts and when it is dry to the touch, place the ivory to the key at the exact spot it is to fit. Once contact is made, the ivory cannot be moved, so be sure the placement is exact."

GARDEN CALENDAR

The following information is provided by the Franklin County Extension Service.

Now is the time to:

- Test leftover seed for viability. Wrap 10-20 seeds in a moist paper towel and place them in a plastic bag. Tie the bag and set in a warm location. If most of the seeds germinate within two weeks or so, then last year's seeds are still good. If germination is poor, discard and buy new seed.
- Sow leek and celery seed for spring planting.
- Prune grape vines anytime now. For the fact sheet "Basic Concepts for Pruning Grapes" contact the Franklin County Extension Service.
- Plan a perennial border, taking into consideration color scheme, height and spread of plants at maturity, time of bloom, foliage texture, plant hardiness and soil and light requirements for each plant. Remember also