

Home/Garden

Getting seedlings started

New technology eases labor, reduces transplanting risks

The groundhog has promised us an early spring and so has the Farmer's Almanac. Now that the eastern sky is brightening when I sit down to that first cup of coffee at 6:30 I can almost believe it. With thoughts of spring, I am seriously putting together my seed order. This year I am also lingering over the catalog pages listing seed starting equipment.

I have started seeds in egg cartons, milk cartons, and mushroom cartons that have ended up decorating every sunny windowsill and I'll probably continue, but ever since I tasted the dependable delights of starting some of my seeds in an Accelerated Propagation System (APS kit) from Gardener's Supply, I've dreamed of making use of all the new gadgets and technology available for starting seeds efficiently.

The APS kit (\$8.95) is a five-part system that provides you with 24 or 40 little seed cells that are kept perfectly moist by way of a sheet of capillary matting under the planting tray that brings water from the reservoir to the soil mix. There's even a clear plastic greenhouse cover. When the seedlings are of sufficient size they can be popped out of their cells and transplanted with little root damage or shock.

This system joins the peat pots and Jiffy pots that have been available for years at nursery centers. These individual pots are ideal for starting seeds like squash, and melon that very much dislike having their roots disturbed when they are transplanted. The trouble with peat pots is that you must remember to cover the entire pot with soil when it's set out in the garden, otherwise the exposed peat wicks moisture away from tender seedlings.

A new development that actually harks back to the 1930s is the paper pot. A commercial PaperPot System (Gardener's Supply) is now available that provides you with a honeycomb of biodegradable paper growing cells in small, medium, and large

Pat
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Between
The Rows



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sizes. A complete system including three plastic trays and 240 pots is \$15.95. There is no root shock when these cells are broken apart and the seedlings planted, and there isn't the same problem with exposed sides wicking away moisture.

Soil blocks

One of the newest ways of starting seeds is to plant them in soil blocks that require no containers. The theory is that as the roots grow to the edge of the soil block, they are naturally air pruned instead of circling inside the container. To make soil blocks you need a contraption that will compress your soil mix into a block. This zinc coated steel gadget from Smith and Hawken requires an investment of \$19.50 but it will last for years.

One of the most important requirements for successful germination of seeds is warmth. Once your seed has sprouted it may prefer cool temperatures, but warmth is needed for initial germination. For this reason electric soil heating cables have become popular. Park Seed sells waterproof cables that have a built in thermostat set to 74 degrees. A 12 foot long cable that will heat three square feet is \$8.95 and their longest cable, 48 feet heating 12 square feet, is \$13.50.

Starting mixes

No matter how you start your seeds, you will need a seed starting mix. The invention and proliferation of seed starting and soilless mixes has made life easier for the gardener and healthier for the seedlings which are less likely to suffer from damping-off disease and keel over when these sterile mixes are used.

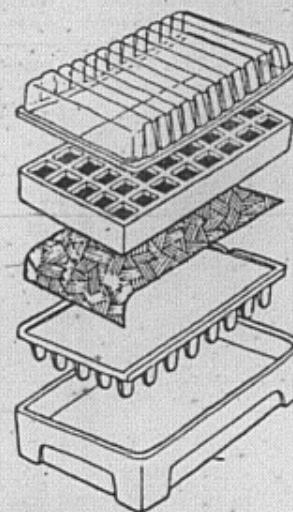
In addition to being light and sterile, many of these mixes, Park's Grow Mix, Redi-Earth from Johnny's Seeds, and Gardener's Supply Germinating Mix, are designed with the proper PH, just the right nutrients and low soluble salts that might otherwise cause problems for seedlings.

No matter whether you pick the simplest or fanciest equipment, starting your own seeds gives you the advantage of choosing your favorite varieties and having healthy seedlings ready at the perfect time for transplanting into your garden.

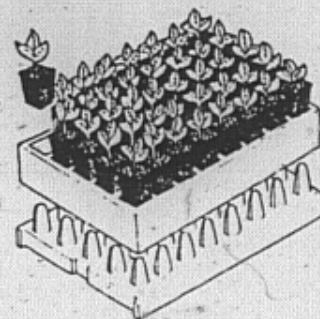
Sources: Gardener's Supply, 128 Intervale Rd, Burlington, VT, 05401; Johnny's Selected Seeds, Foss Hill Rd., Albion, ME, 04910; Park Seed, Cokesbury Rd, Greenwood, SC 29647-0001; Smith & Hawken, 25 Corte Madera, Mill Valley, CA 94941.

Accelerated Propagation System.

How it works:



- Greenhouse cover and insulated growing tray hold warmth to help seeds germinate fast.
- Capillary matting under planting tray draws water like a wick to prevent under/over watering.
- Water reservoir automatically supplies water and nutrients for a week or longer.
- Unique pegboard pops transplants up without damaging roots or stems.



The delight and benefits of raising herbs