

BACK TO THE GARDEN

STARTING WITH SEEDS

BY PETER GARNHAM

There is no doubt that the easiest way to start a garden is to go to a local nursery and buy young plants, ready to pop in the ground. But if you want to grow a particular vegetable or flower variety, planting from seed is the way to go because nurseries are limited in what they can stock. You might not find your favorite tomato, or that gorgeous gaillardia.

Starting seeds indoors is easy—just rig up a four-foot fluorescent light fixture, suspended on chains so it hovers about two inches over the seedlings. Once they have two sets of “true” leaves (which resemble adult leaf shapes) they can be transplanted from seed flats into four-inch pots or, weather permitting, into the garden. But first they need to be “hardened off” for three or four days by placing them outdoors every day, in the shade, while they adjust to sunlight. If nights are still cool, they should be brought back indoors for the first few nights. Sowing seeds outdoors is even easier, if you follow four simple rules:

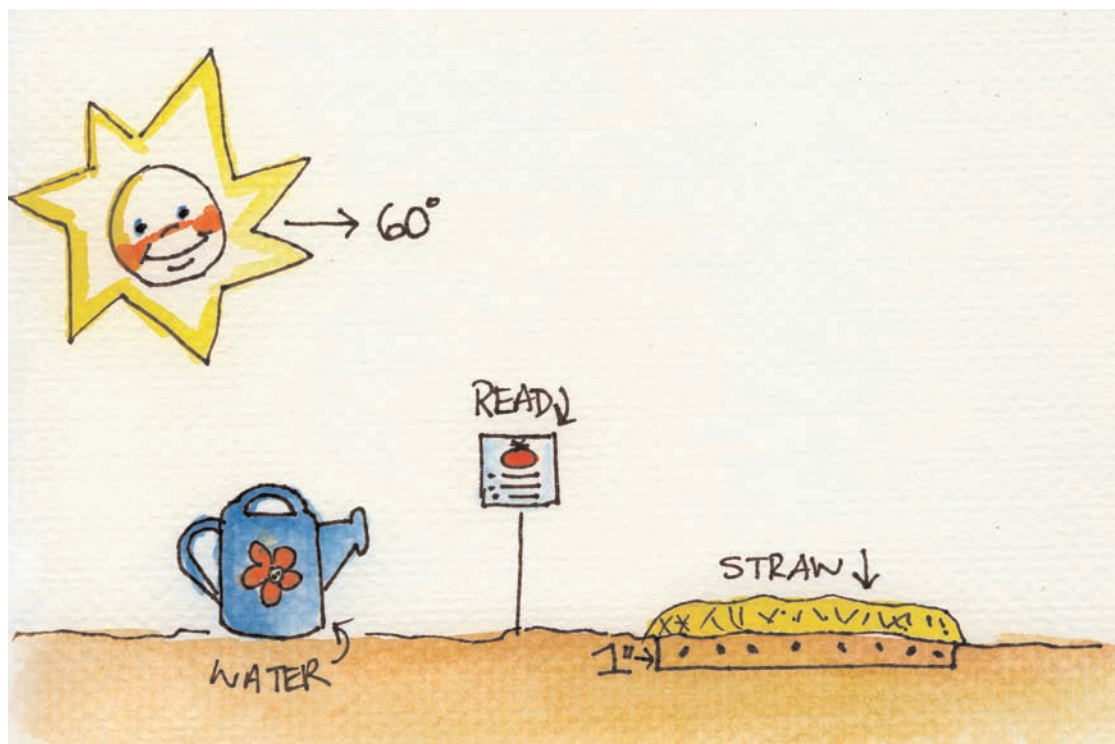
Don't plant too soon. Most flowers and vegetables like warm soil, so you will be disappointed if you sow basil or tomatoes in cold soil. They just won't grow, and the seed may rot before it germinates. Sow seeds indoors, or wait until the days and nights are consistently in the 60s or warmer. Even peas, a traditionally early crop, need soil temperatures in the high 40s before they will grow.

There are three important exceptions to this rule: lettuce, spinach, and Asian greens. All three actually prefer cool soil, so you can sow them in April and May, or September and October. Lettuce, in fact, will not germinate in hot soil.

Don't plant too deep. By all means make a nice smooth seedbed of fine soil, but firm it a little before you plant seeds in it. I use a 1-inch square stick, about 3 feet long, when sowing small quantities of seed. I make the seedbed, firm it with the flat side of the stick, then make a furrow for the seed with one of the stick's edges. Sow the seeds and use one of the stick's edges to lightly scrape a little loose soil over the top, firm it down again, and water it gently. The rule of thumb is to plant the seed twice the depth of its longest dimension. The excep-

tions (and there are many) are the seeds that need light to germinate. Lettuce, for example, needs light to germinate; you can cover it with a thin sifting of fine soil, but if you bury it deep, in the dark, it will just stay dormant.

Don't let the seedbed dry out. To germinate, a seed needs moisture. The surface of the soil can dry rapidly from a little sunshine or wind. A light covering of clean straw can help to conserve moisture, but you must keep watch and remove it when your seeds start to poke their heads above the surface. Soil that has been enriched with generous amounts of compost will hold its moisture much more efficiently



than our native sandy soils. Rather than watering *after* you sow seed, try thoroughly moistening the soil several inches deep *before* you plant. Then all you have to do is maintain that gentle moisture seeds need.

Do read the seed packet instructions. Unlike the people who write instruction manuals for electronic equipment, folks who write those terse instructional sentences on the backs of seed packets really do know what they are doing. Heed what they say, and may your sowing of seed be fruitful. □

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