

The Garden Corner

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Master Gardeners of Johnson County Missouri

Have you noticed? The days are getting longer. Hurrah! By the end of February, we will be receiving a little over 11 hours of sun a day. Spring can't be far off. I'd bet there are a few of our county gardeners thinking about getting their seeds started. If that sounds like you, then here are some key elements to successful seed starting operations. Maybe, we'll be able to answer some of the problems you've had in the past. And, for the "old hands", this will be a short refresher.

First up! Make sure you clean everything really well using a solution of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water. While not the leading cause of failure, transferring diseases from last year's adventure is a consistent problem and bears consideration.

Know your "seed start" date. That is the date counted backward from the transplant (or sow date) on the package of your seeds. There are charts easily accessible on-line for every kind of seed imaginable that will give you the date to begin. Keep in mind. Even though we have changed to a different Zone (6b), our last frost date has remained unchanged: April 15th (Tax Day).

Perhaps the second biggest reason for killing your seedlings is over watering. Most everyone succeeds to the point of germination – or, when the seedlings first appear. It is at this point where we should monitor the amount of water carefully. Keep the soil-medium, moist. That's it.

The last, and the biggest reason for a whole host of problems is light. Have you (or do you know someone) who always has "leggy" seedlings? ☺ Ok – Pay attention. I've borrowed from the University of Oklahoma's Ag. Department the best explanation as to how this is possible. Light and how it's used by plants is measured by micromoles (or units used by plants). A regular fluorescent bulb provides from 50 to 100 units. A high intensity bulb provides up to 400. Now, get ready to be amazed! A cloudy, spring day will go from 500 to 800 and a bright shiny day in May will hit 1,500 to 2,000 micromoles. When confronted with the power of the sun, the home gardener is left lacking in the light department. And the seedlings are left reaching for the light, thus becoming leggy. So, the next time you visit your friend (you know, the one who always has leggy seedlings) you can point to the need for additional high intensity lighting. You might also observe "the closer the lights are to the plants, the more light will be provided"; and as a general rule, about 6 inches will do. If there is a southward facing window, you've got some free light pouring in. Just remember, the cold glass temperatures will radiate outward. If your seed containers are too close, you could end up slowing their growth.

If you have any specific questions, you can always write to: 370 NW 121 Rd, Warrensburg, MO 64093 or email: maandpak@embarqmail.com and I'll get back with you. If you are considering fertilizing your evergreens, now is the time.