Growing your own transplants expands your choices

Source: Rick Durham, extension professor, Department of Horticulture

Garden centers are beginning to fill their shelves with pots of vegetables and flowers. The lush green, the vivid yellows, oranges and blues you find at this time of year can entice you to stuff your cart with plants for your garden. Certainly, it’s an easy way to start your garden in the spring, but there is another way: starting your own plants from seeds.

The big advantage in growing your own transplants is the wide choice of varieties available in seed form. Commercial growers tend to concentrate on a few popular varieties. Anyone walking into a garden center and being faced with row after row of begonias, impatiens and Better Boy tomatoes can understand that. Seed catalogs and even the seed displays in home centers offer a much wider variety.

You can begin vegetable transplants outdoors at this time of year, usually starting late March to early April, but protection from colder weather is a must. While a greenhouse is not essential, being able to control temperature, light, moisture and ventilation is crucial. Simple cold frames and hot beds can easily be made from scrap lumber and old window frames you may have lying around in your garage or shed. Kits also are available from many sources. Row covers made of a variety of materials can help maintain humidity and prevent die-off when temperatures drop at night. Be sure to provide ventilation on sunny days, otherwise your transplants will overheat and die.

You can buy all the materials you need for starting transplants at local garden supply centers or through seed and garden supply catalogs. Starter kits containing all the necessary equipment also are available. Some have the seed already planted; you only need to add water and put them in a suitable growing area.

To start seeds indoors, you must provide plenty of bright light and the proper humidity. Sow seeds in a plant tray containing an artificial growing medium of peat moss and perlite, which you can find at garden centers. Mixing in about 25% compost can reduce the need for fertilizers later and encourage seed germination. Enclose the seeded trays in a plastic bag and keep them at room temperature until seedlings emerge. Then, remove the plastic and transfer the trays to suitable growing areas. The average windowsill usually does not get enough light. Use artificial light such as a mixture of cool white and warm white fluorescent lamps, plant-growth fluorescent lamps or LED grow lights to supplement. Locate the lamps five to 10 inches from the foliage and operate them 12 to 18 hours/day. Be sure to keep seedlings cool enough at night (60° to 65°F) for strong, sturdy growth after they germinate.

About two weeks before transplanting them to the garden, plants should be hardened off (toughened) so they can withstand the outside environment. To do so, begin reducing water and fertilizer (though don’t let them dry out), gradually expose them to higher sunlight conditions and expose them to lower outside temperatures but take them inside when temperatures drop below the mid 40s to prevent cold damage. Next time we will talk about how to properly transplant to the garden.

For more information about starting plants for your flower or vegetable garden, contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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