



Trowel Talk!

February, 2010

Seedlings offer up rewards

If you have never grown flowers from seed before, this is a good time to find out how rewarding it can be. Plants you grow yourself always seem far more interesting than ones bought at the store, and they often survive better in harsh winters. They cost less and adapt to your conditions right away. Besides, if you collect seeds from your own plants, you will develop your own garden strain.



Seeding flats (photo M.A. Van Berlo)

The secret to success is providing the right conditions. Most seeds are very tolerant and will germinate without trouble in less than three weeks. They all need moisture, air, light (or rarely darkness) and a temperature between 16-22°C but some prefer cooler conditions (see seed packet instructions). Most failures result from sowing seeds too deep. An easy rule of thumb is to leave tiny

seeds uncovered, give a scant covering to medium-small seeds and push larger seeds individually below the soil surface.

Fill clean containers with a dampened soil-less blend available at nurseries and garden centres. These blends are absorbent yet porous mixtures that provide air and moisture for fragile seedling roots. Do not use ordinary garden soil. It contains many natural soil pathogens that can kill seedlings. Sow the seeds thinly on the surface and water with a gentle sprayer to settle them into the mix. Cover with a plastic wrap and label and date at once. Ziploc bags make good mini-greenhouses for small containers. Put them on a window sill or other area with indirect light and wait for the thrill of excitement when the first shoots emerge. Keep the container loosely closed until most of the seeds have germinated and then open the containers to the air. Check seedlings regularly to ensure they have enough moisture but haven't dried out. Frequent light watering is better than drenching less often. Overwatering can lead to failure.

Once your seedlings produce their second or third pair of leaves and are perhaps 3-5 cm. high, they need more space. Water first, then using a pencil or something similar, gently lift and transfer each seedling to its own pot or plant-pack, trying not to damage the roots. If you only have room for a few plants, snip off most of the seedlings, leaving a few well-spaced ones undisturbed. Always hold seedlings by the leaves because they will die if stems are damaged.

At this stage, the seedlings will need feeding. Soil-less mixes contain no nutrients. Start watering with a quarter-strength solution of a 10-15-10 plant food mix or something similar, once a week, using plain water in between if necessary. As they grow bigger, increase to half-strength.

When temperatures warm up in May, choose a calm day to move your seedlings outside to harden off in a sheltered spot away from sun. This transition from constant indoor warmth to cooler outdoor air has to be a slow process to lessen plant shock. It may take up to a week and should start with only an hour outside each day, gradually increasing time outside until seedlings are acclimated. Plant them in the garden when big enough after the end of May.



Assorted seedlings (photo Kelly Noel)

When I first tried growing seeds 20 years ago, it was easier than I thought and a great way to obtain plants that I would never find for sale. I am now an addict who always looks forward to starting seeds every year. Seeds are a fascinating mystery and I encourage you to check this out for yourself.

Gillian Boyd
Master Gardener

Trowel Talk!

- Newsletter of the Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton
- Volume 1, Number 2
- <http://mgottawa.mgoi.ca>
- editor@mgottawa.mgoi.ca

February TO DO List

- check your seed packages for germination times (i.e., how many days they will take to germinate). Take into account the safe set-out dates (i.e., average date of last frost) and count backwards to see if it is time to start seeding indoors
- check any stored bulbs and tubers to make sure they are not too moist or too dry

Tip of the Month:

Some common household items can be recycled and used in your garden.

- venetian blinds can be cut into 15-20cm lengths and used as plant tags – use pencil or permanent marker to write the plant name on the tag.



- those paper rings that are wrapped around your take-out tea or coffee cup can be used as collars around seedlings to keep the cutworms away. Or something we all have – the cardboard tube from toilet paper works just as well.

- take-out or deli containers with a clear lid make a great germination tray. Seed germination requires even moisture. As germination begins, gradually open the lid (a bit more each day) to acclimatise the seedlings.

Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton



Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

ONGOING:

Telephone Help Line: 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1–3 pm

E-mail Help Line: mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca

- monitored daily
- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

SPEAKING EVENTS:

Good Plants for Pollinators – March 6, 2010

Speaker: Gillian Boyd, Master Gardener

Ron Kolbus Centre, 105 Greenview Ave, Ottawa

Hosted by Seedy Saturday – open to public (Info: www.seeds.ca)

Waterwise Gardening – March 9, 2010 – 7:30

Speaker: Nancy Seppala, Master Gardener

Southminster United Church, 15 Aylmer Avenue, Ottawa

Hosted by Old Ottawa South Garden Club (guests welcome)

Gardening – for better, for worse – March 23, 2010 – 6:30

Speaker: Lee Boltwood, Master Gardener

Stittsville Public Library, Stittsville

Hosted by Stittsville Public Library (Free – register at 613-836-3381)

Ottawa Home & Garden Show – March 25-28, 2010

Talks by Master Gardeners will be featured on the Garden Stage
Lansdowne Park, Ottawa

For more info: www.ottawahomeshows.com

Good Bugs – identifying and attracting them – March 27, 2010 – 2:00

Speaker: Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

Greenboro District Library, 363 Lorry Greenberg Drive, Ottawa

Hosted by Greenboro District Library (Free – register at 613-580-2957)

Managing Fruit Trees & Shrubs – April 6, 2010 – 7:00

Speaker: Lee Boltwood, Master Gardener

Building 72, Arboretum, Central Experimental Farm

Hosted by Friends of the Farm (**Cost:** Go to www.friendsofthefarm.ca)

Home-Grown! Vegetable Gardening – April 7, 2010 – 7:00

Speaker: David Hinks, Master Gardener

Kanata United Church, 33 Leacock Drive, Kanata

Hosted by Kanata Environmental Network (guests welcome)

Solutions to Common Garden Problems – April 13, 2010 – 7:00

Speaker: Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

Building 72, Arboretum, Central Experimental Farm

Hosted by Friends of the Farm (**Cost:** Go to www.friendsofthefarm.ca)



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: 613-836-1491

For more information on Master Gardeners, visit our website:

<http://mgottawa.mgoi.ca>

- a small fan to circulate the air will help prevent seedlings from damping off.

- to deter cats or birds from digging up your containers, insert plastic forks, tines side up, every couple of inches.

