Gardening Tips & Techniques: Planting Seedlings

It’s about that time! In Pittsburgh, our last heavy frost date is usually around the beginning to middle of May. So, around mid-May it’s generally safe time plant summer crops, like tomatoes! That being said, if you plant now keep an eye on the forecast. If it looks like a frost could occur, cover your plants overnight with an old sheet or thin cloth to insulate them.

Check out this link for information about which crops to plant when. The chart also includes information about whether a particular crop performs best when seeded or transplanted, or if either planting method works.

How to Transplant Seedlings

**Step 1:** Using seed catalogs or the chart linked above, make sure it’s the right time to plant the crops you're planning to grow.

**Step 2:** If you haven’t already, make a plan for your garden.

- Use seed catalogs or this chart to determine how much space each plant will need.

**Step 3:** Get the soil ready.

*For ground beds:*

- Weed, till, dig, or otherwise loosen the soil where the plants will go.
- Add soil amendments or compost.
- Prepare an area large enough for your plants to be spaced correctly.

*For raised beds:*

- Weed and loosen the soil if it is compacted.
- Add soil amendments or compost.

*For containers:*

- Select containers that are big enough for the mature stage of the plants you want to grow. The chart at the bottom of this article gives a good idea of how much soil each crop requires. Remember that tall plants can overturn a small pot, especially on a windy day! As a general rule, choose the largest recommended pot size.
- Fill the containers with a high-quality potting mix or replace 1/3 of the volume of old potting mix (from healthy plants) with compost.

**Step 4:** Select your seedlings.

- Purchase from a reputable local nursery or natural food store. Grow Pittsburgh offers seedlings Tues.-Sun. at the Frick Art & Historical Center Greenhouse, through June 16. We’ll also have a booth, along with lots of other great local suppliers at May Market at Phipps (Mother’s Day weekend). Or, check with a gardener friend for extras. People who start their own seedlings often have surplus to share.
Step 5: Plant seedlings.

- Try to plant in a morning or evening, or when the weather is cloudy. Direct sun can be hard on a seedling as it adjusts to its new home.
- Dig holes just deep enough for the plants’ roots. Space holes to give each plant room to grow to its mature size (check out this chart or a seed catalog for more info).
- Carefully remove each seedling from its pot. If its roots twirl in a circle or have grown into a mat, carefully loosen them.
- Place the seedling in its hole.
- If the hole is too deep, add more soil.
- If the hole is too shallow, dig until it is deep enough.
- Fill the hole in with loose soil, pressing gently but firmly to remove air pockets from around the roots.
- The soil around the seedling should be about slightly lower than the rest of the garden soil, so water will collect around the plant.

Step 6: Water the seedlings.

- Right after planting is a good time to fertilize the seedlings, to give the plants a boost and help avoid transplant shock.
- Use a diluted fertilizer (a mixture of fish and seaweed works well, or compost tea), and water each seedling well.
- Alternatively, sprinkle some compost around each plant and water well with plain water.

Tips:
- Mulching your new seedlings is a great way to conserve water use and keep back weeds. Straw or brown leaves work well. A thick layer will offer the most benefit.
- Young seedlings can be more susceptible to frost than older plants. Watch the forecast, and cover seedlings at night if the temperatures threaten to dip into the mid 30’s.
- Keep an eye on your baby seedlings, especially in the first few weeks, watering if the soil dries out.