

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Thiessen February 10, 2023

Post Rock Extension District Horticulture Agent

Get Your Garden Started Early

Have you been dreaming of getting outside and working in your garden? February is often a cold and dreary month for gardeners. If you want to get your garden started early, you can plant seeds indoors in the winter months. Planting vegetable and flower transplants from seed can make the winter a much more interesting time of year. Follow the steps below for a successful start to your gardening season.

Purchase Recommended, Quality Seed:

Seed catalogs have started to arrive! It's easy to get swept away by the glossy, colorful, pictures. Keep in mind not all varieties will be successful in our area. Stop by the Extension Office to pick up a copy of K-State's recommended vegetable varieties. These plants have proven themselves across the state of Kansas, it's a good resource to have when deciding what to plant. You can also talk to your neighbors, friends, and local garden center about what has worked well for them. Obtain your seeds from a reputable source including garden centers and seed catalogs. If choosing seeds from a business that does not specialize in plants, pay special attention to the package date to make sure the seed was packaged for the current year. Though most seeds remain viable for about three years, germination decreases as seed ages.

Determine the Date to Seed:

There are two important things to know when determining the date to seed transplants: the target date for transplanting outside and the number of weeks needed to grow the transplant. The target dates for transplanting cool-season crops such as broccoli, cauliflower, and onions are the end of March to the beginning of April. Warm season crops like tomatoes, peppers, and most annual flowers are planted around the middle of May in the garden. To learn the number of weeks needed to grow your specific vegetable transplant consult the Kansas Garden Guide. Here is an example, if you want to start broccoli, cabbage, or cauliflower seeds indoors, consider when they can go into the garden. They are cool season crops and can be planted outdoors before the last frost. Cool season crops need plenty of time to grow before the heat of the summer arrives.

Around the beginning of April is a good estimate to get the plants in the garden. Broccoli takes 6 to 8 weeks to grow to transplant size. If we want to plant them outside on April 8th we need to count back approximately 8 weeks so we know when to start them indoors- which would be February 11th. These are not exact dates, but give you a good idea of when to start your seedlings.

Sowing Seeds:

Do not use garden soil to germinate seeds. It is too heavy and may contain disease organisms. Use a media made especially for seed germination. Keep the seeds moist. Water often enough that the media never dries. Using a clear plastic wrap over the top of the container can reduce the amount of watering needed. Remove the wrap after the seedlings emerge.

Light:

Most plants will germinate in either darkness or light, some require darkness (Centura, Larkspur, Pansy, Portulaca, Phlox, and Verbena) and others require light (Ageratum, Browallia, Begonia, Coleus, Geranium, Impatiens, Lettuce, Nicotiana, Petunia, and Snapdragon). Once the seeds have sprouted, they all require adequate amounts of light. South facing windows may not provide enough light, so fluorescent fixtures are often used. Suspend the lights two to four inches above the top of the plants and leave the lights on for 16 hours a day.

Temperature:

The temperature for best germination is often higher than what we may find in our homes especially since evaporating moisture can cool the germination media. Moving the container closer to the ceiling, like the top of the refrigerator, can help but a heating mat is best for consistent germination. After plants have germinated, they can be grown at a cooler temperature (65 to 70 degrees during the days and 55 to 60 degrees at night). This will help prevent tall, spindly transplants.

Hardening Plants:

Plants grown inside will often undergo transplant shock if not hardened off. Plants are hardened off by moving them outside and exposing them to sun and wind before transplanting occurs. Start about two weeks before transplanting, gradually expose the plants to outside conditions. Increase the number of hours and degree of exposure over the two-week period.

Cure those winter blues by looking through seed catalogs, buying some fun plants, and getting your garden started indoors! If you have questions about starting seeds indoors, contact your local Extension Office.

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at cchiessen@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597).