

# Great Starts

Convenience wins out over economics



Tera Rutecki

To all the people who grow and sell vegetable starts, thank you! Those little trays of baby plants, locally grown and ready to go, are well worth the money for a casual gardener like me. I love eating out of the garden, but there are only two of us. I don't need to grow a heap of food, and I don't have a lot of time to harvest and put food by. Besides, I like to support the local farmers, who grow many things far better than I can.

Growing vegetables from seed is much more economical — as long as you are successful. But if your situation is similar to mine, there's a good chance that a seed packet holds more seed than you really need for one season. Admittedly, seed properly stored remains viable for another year or several, depending on the crop. But if the economy of growing things from seed depends on keeping seed from year to year, do you have the right conditions to store seed properly? Are you well organized? And how do you compensate for declining germination rates?

Most things are not difficult to grow from seed, if you pay attention. This is especially true of crops sown directly in the ground, such as salad greens, carrots, squash and beans. Growing certain things from seed can, however, be quite a challenge if you have pest problems. In my neighborhood, every salad and carrot bed has to be protected from cats. That's a minor challenge compared to dealing with the world's largest population of mollusks. The slugs here are as big as mice, and snails festoon every other plant on a cool morning. Spinach? Forget it.

Then you have to worry about seedlings drying out on a sunny day. Fresh, healthy starts are reliable and require a bit less vigilance. Starts may seem expensive, but they help me produce organic food far more cheaply than I can buy it, and very little goes to waste. For me, at least, convenience wins out.

When conditions are right, high-quality starts can double in size in a day or two. Good soil preparation, followed by careful and immediate watering in, ensures they grow away strongly. For six starts, I work a handful of organic fertilizer into the soil before I plant. To be on the safe side, especially in early spring when soils are cool, I follow the advice of a grower who suggested watering at planting and every couple of weeks thereafter with liquid organic fertilizer. That makes it pretty hard to fail.

This year I missed the one good window in late winter for planting peas, so I used starts in April. I planted a tray of snow and snap pea starts around a plant tower and got a hefty crop, more than enough for two of us and occasional guests for the three or four weeks the pea plants were producing well. In warm weather I picked them every morning for two or three days, until I had enough for a meal. It worked out fine. Last year I did the same with green beans.

One of my favorite candidates for purchasing as starts is cilantro. Six sturdy little plants produce copious greens for several weeks. Before those plants go to seed, another tray goes in the ground. Each tray costs less than two bunches at the market, and there are no leftovers going slimy in the fridge. More importantly, we can use cilantro on the spur of the moment, so we get to enjoy it more often.

Starts seem doubly worth it at this time of year, when we should be gearing up again for a fall garden. Some people grow their own starts from seed, keeping them under cover to avoid the scorching sun while they wait for some vacant ground. Since I find that, for instance, six kale plants each of two varieties is plenty (and we like kale!) starts make more sense for me than seed. I'll still sow short-term fall and overwintering salad crops, because I can do that when the weather cools down in September. There's more space in the garden by then.

If you are a serious vegetable gardener and you need lots of produce or desire specific varieties, seed is undoubtedly the way to go. Maybe you save your own seed, or share packets of purchased seed with a group of friends. If none of these apply, and especially if you are a beginner, I recommend farmer-grown starts. We are blessed with several farmers who reliably offer an amazing variety of high-quality starts, practically year-round. Just be sure to shop where the trays have not been allowed to dry out or get root bound. I buy most of mine at farmers markets, from people like Tera of Morning Sun Organics.

EW

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