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## Transplants - Save a Nickel, Spend a Dime

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## GARDEN NOTES

# TRANSPLANTS - SAVE A NICKEL, SPEND A DIME

*By Dennis Hinkamp*

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Does this sound familiar? “Any activity I undertake to save time or money will actually take twice as long as expected, and cost double any amount of money I had hoped to save.”

Remember this maxim if you are thinking about growing your own transplants, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Each spring, many people see the price of vegetables and bedding plants in the nurseries and garden centers and begin to think, “Hey, I can raise a few small plants in my family room next winter and save myself a few bucks.”

Think again.

Unless you love raising transplants as a hobby, and you have a nice hobby greenhouse, solarium or sunroom, leave growing transplants to the professionals, Goodspeed says. It can very easily become an exercise in frustration and futility. For those who really enjoy the challenge and have the time, growing transplants is a joy. It's also an opportunity to raise some odd plants that can not be found in local nurseries.

If you really are determined to grow your own transplants, there are a few things to remember that may make it a little easier and more successful, he suggests. First, the more you enjoy working with plants, the more likely you will be successful. Second, be sure you have a large area that gets lots of sunshine. A coffee table in the living room, or a wide window sill in the bedroom should not be considered a replacement for a greenhouse.

“Most seeds can be germinated in a small flat set on the fridge or furnace,” he says. “Bottom heat is normally the most critical factor. It is also important to make sure the seeds get sufficient moisture, but never let them stand in water. Be sure to read the package, since some seeds germinate best in light and should not be covered with soil. Speaking of soil, a good potting or seed starter mix purchased from a nursery works well, or you can make your own by combining sand, peat moss and vermiculite or perlite.”

Once the seeds germinate, move them immediately to a sunny location to prevent leggy plants, Goodspeed says. Most homes are too dark and too warm at night. As the plants develop, they will need optimal growing conditions during the day (sunny, between 65 to 80 degrees), and cool nights (between 45 to 60 degrees). A small cold frame next to the house, a hobby greenhouse or a sunroom that can be cooled down are usually better than a warm, south-facing

room in the house.

After the seedlings begin to grow and produce their first couple of true leaves, transplant them from the seeding flat into individual pots or small packs, he says. When transplanting, be careful not to disturb the roots any more than necessary. Use a dull table knife to separate the plants and support the roots as you move them to the new containers. Another precaution is to make sure that the new container's soil drains well.

Continue growing them in a location that is sunny during the day and cool at night, he adds. Be cautious when watering, since over-watering causes many problems with new transplants. Fertilize the developing plants with a small amount of water soluble fertilizer every week, or whenever you water. Since the roots and plants are not strong at first, they need small amounts of fertilizer every few days. Check the transplants daily to make sure they do not dry out or become nutrient deficient.

The transplants will need to be hardened off before they are planted in the garden or flower bed, Goodspeed says. This can be done by placing them outdoors, in the sunshine, and gradually increasing the length of their stay outside each day. For example, place them outdoors for four hours the first day, six the next, and so on, until they are ready to be permanently planted.

The timing of starting seeds for transplants can be tricky, he says. If they are planted too early, they get tall and leggy by the time the weather warms sufficiently for them to be moved outdoors. If they get a late start, not much, if anything, is gained by growing them indoors. Look on the package to see how many weeks before the last frost date to start them.

Normally, in the Ogden area, our last frost date is around the first or second week of May. Count back the number of weeks that will be needed, then start the seeds on that week. For example, tomatoes need between six and eight weeks to germinate and get large enough to move outdoors. This means they need to be started inside around the second week of March.

“If this is the year you plan to grow your own transplants, good luck,” Goodspeed says. “Hopefully it will be a good experience. If this year doesn't work out, call it a learning experience, try again next year, or do what your instincts told you to do in the first place, let someone else grow your transplants.”

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