

Starting 2017 Off Right – Gardening Style!

Happy New Year! As difficult as it is to imagine that another year has passed, the calendar says it is true! Equally difficult is the idea that while Christmas decorations are just coming down, it's already time to start gardening!

It's true! Let's use onions as an example: if growing onions from seed, it will likely take six to eight weeks to reach transplant size. If we can put them out in late March – and we often can – that means starting seeds in late January! That means we need to be looking at and purchasing seed soon! Even our warm season crops like tomatoes or peppers might require six weeks or so from seed to transplant ready. If we plant in mid-May, that's an April first planting date. While that might seem like a long ways off, remember, 2016 went by quickly, as well!

If you plan to start transplants from seeds, success is best achieved by careful attention to detail. Once you've determined when to start transplants (if you need a list – K-State Research and Extension Horticulture Specialist Dr. Ward Upham has one I'd be happy to pass along!), make sure you can get the seed you want. Talk to friends and neighbors. Garden centers are a good resource as well. K-State's Recommended Vegetable Varieties publication is another resource that indexes plants proven to do well in Kansas.

Using an appropriate seeding medium (NOT garden soil!), keep seed moist by never allowing the seeding medium to dry out. Light is important as well. South facing windows can help, but you'll often need to use fluorescent fixtures placed two to four inches above the tops of the plants to get the 16 hours a day suggested for most plants.

You might think your home is warm, but it's often not warm enough for seed germination. Consider a heating mat for more consistent results since most seeds won't germinate unless temperatures are at 70 degrees or above! After germination, they can be grown at a cooler temperature (day: 65 to 70 degrees/night: 55 to 60 degrees) to help prevent tall, spindly transplants.

You'll also need to take a little time for brushing – yes, brushing! – since plants *do* react to movement. Twenty brushing strokes per day with your hand over the plants stimulates them to become stockier and less leggy. Brushing will *not* compensate for lack of light or over-crowding.

All the work you've done above could be for nothing if you don't prepare transplants to move outside from their comfortable indoor environment! Harden plants off during the two weeks prior to transplanting by moving them outside for an increasing number of hours each day. This will gradually increase their exposure to sun and wind prior to permanent transplanting.

For a list of seeding dates/temperatures, or a copy of the Recommended Vegetable Varieties, contact a Meadowlark Extension District Office or e-mail me at dhallaue@ksu.edu.