
THE IMPATIENT GARDENER'S GUIDE TO SPRING PLANTING

BY JENNIFER HEMMINGSEN

No one has ever accused me of being patient, and when it comes to gardening I am the world's worst. At the first whiff of spring I am unpacking my pots, haunting the nurseries and pacing the perimeter of my modest garden plot—willing the ground to warm up.

Last year, I decided to get a jump on my cold crops. As I started digging the furrow for peas I kept running across fist-sized rocks. I tossed them aside, until my daughter pointed out that they were actually clumps of frozen earth. OK, so not even peas like it that cold.

This year, I resolved to sit on my hands and let Ma Nature do her work.

Rushing the season is bad for a number of reasons. Planting too early puts your seeds at risk of rotting in the ground. Even if they do sprout, they could be massacred by a late frost. Stomping around the garden in wet weather spreads disease and compacts the soil.

And there's no real reason to rush anyway. Plants will grow at a slower rate, if at all, until the weather warms.

That doesn't mean you can't get dirty. Remember elementary school when you grew those bean seeds in a Dixie cup? It's that easy to grow your own seedlings, lettuces and herbs indoors.

Leaf lettuces are probably the easiest, because the plants love diffuse light and cool conditions. Your south-facing windowsill is perfect in early spring, just as long as the window itself isn't freezing. Later, as the sun starts to heat up, move the plants to a sunny kitchen table to keep them from burning.

Sow seeds directly into a shallow container filled with good quality potting soil or a soilless matrix—other mediums are too heavy and can smother your little babies. For fun, combine several varieties of greens—like arugula, red and oak leaf lettuces and mustard greens—in pretty pots.

Thoroughly water and cover with plastic until the seeds sprout. Then remove the plastic. In about three weeks, when the plants are about four inches tall, harvest the baby leaves for a spring salad. Just pinch off the largest leaves and let the plants continue to grow.

Kitchen herbs are another great way to get your gardening fix and there are several starter kits on the market that include everything you need. When growing herbs indoors, start with plants when you can. Select a south or west window and water lightly. Herbs hate soggy roots, but misting them will provide a little extra humidity. If you decide to keep your herbs indoors even after the weather warms, feed them every few months with an organic fertilizer or compost tea.

Finally, start some vegetable plants indoors to transplant once spring finally takes hold. Choose hearty plants like tomatoes and peppers. Invest in a seed flat and spend a few extra dollars on a fluorescent shop light and adjustable chain. Keep the light on for

10-12 hours a day and hang it just two inches above the tips of the plants. This will keep them from getting leggy (long, spindly and weak) and also keep the big flats out of your way.

When you just can't stand it any more, get out there and dig. When the days are warm but nights are still chilly, set garden cloches over transplants to protect them from frost. A cloche is like a tiny greenhouse with an open bottom and can be found at garden stores. You can also make your own out of anything from old storm windows to plastic milk jugs—just be sure there's some ventilation so the plants don't overheat during the day. Water once a week and uncover plants when the temperature warms up.

Now if there was only some way to hurry those tomatoes.



Photo By Carole Topalian