Cold? Snow? No matter to gardeners

K-State horticulture expert says now’s the time to select seeds, begin transplants

MANHATTAN, Kan. – It’s barely January, it’s cold and many landscapes are covered with snow, but in Kansas and surrounding areas, gardeners are heeding a similar set of commands: Ready, Set…Go?

“Planning for and starting vegetable and flower transplants,” said Kansas State University horticulture expert Cynthia Domenghini, “can make this a much more interesting time of year.”

Steadfast gardeners know that the first of the year is an ideal time for purchasing quality seed. Specific to Kansas, Domenghini said K-State Research and Extension publishes a guide of recommended vegetable varieties to help gardeners get started.

“These plants have proven themselves across the state of Kansas and this is a good place to start when deciding what to plant,” Domenghini said. “However, also talk to your neighbors, friends and your local garden center about what has worked well for them.”

Domenghini said most garden centers and seed catalogs are reputable sources for quality seeds. 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,” she said.

“Though most seed remains viable for about three years, germination decreases as seed ages. (Buying current seed) allows you to keep seed for a longer period of time with an expectation of good germination.”

Additional tips include:

Determine the ‘Date to Seed’ when purchasing seeds. Gardeners who start growing plants indoors should also know their target date for transplanting outside. For example, late March and early April is the target date for transplanting broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and onions; most annual flowers are not planted until May 10 or later.
Do not use garden soil to germinate seed indoors; Domenghini said garden soil is too heavy and may contain disease organisms. “Use a media made especially for seed germination,” she said.

Seed must be kept moist to germinate. Water often enough so that the media never dries. “Using a clear plastic wrap over the top of the container can reduce the amount of watering needed,” Domenghini said. “Remove the wrap after the seedlings emerge.”

Many plants will germinate in darkness or light, but some require darkness only. All plants require adequate amounts of light once emergence occurs. South-facing windows may not provide enough light, so fluorescent or LED lights may be needed.

The temperature best for germination is often higher than what we commonly keep inside homes. “Moving the container to the ceiling or top of a refrigerator can help, but a heating mat is best for consistent germination,” Domenghini said.

Plants react to movement. Brushing over the plants with your hand stimulates them to become more stocky and less ‘leggy,’ according to Domenghini. Try 20 brushing strokes per day, she said.

Harden plants by moving them outside and exposing them to sun and wind before transplanting occurs. Start gradually two weeks out and increase the number of hours and degrees of exposure over the two-week period.

Domenghini and her colleagues in K-State’s Department of Horticulture and Natural Resources produce a weekly Horticulture Newsletter with tips for maintaining home landscapes. The newsletter is available to view online or can be delivered by email each week.

Interested persons can also send their garden- and yard-related questions to Domenghini at Cdom@ksu.edu, or contact your local extension office.

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K-State Horticulture Newsletter, https://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/horticulture-resource-center/horticulture-newsletter

K-State Research and Extension local offices, https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html

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