EDIBLE GARDENING GROUP

SEED STARTING WORKSHOP – FEBRUARY 4, 2012 – JIM O’LAUGHLIN

**Why start plants from seed?**

You can get an earlier harvest, greater variety of plants, stronger and healthier seedlings. It’s much cheaper than buying transplants plus there is the enjoyment and satisfaction of growing your own.

**Seed starting Mix:**

There are many variations and schools of thought. Some people will only use sterilized soil because they have had issues with damping off disease. Others will only use unsterilized because they want live active soil.

We had a variety of seed starting mixes available at the workshop:

FoxFarm Light Warrior – specifically for starting seeds. It seemed very light weight and contains peat which dries out fast.

Fox Farm Ocean Forest – really a potting soil but many people use it to start seeds and have had great success.

Fox Farm Happy Frog potting soil – again really for plants but people report good results.

Empire Builder – recommended by The Lucky Garden in Dublin. Seems like it has a good texture and more bulk than the Light Warrior.

Orchard Supply potting soil – very loose and found not to hold together around seedlings. Questionable ingredients.

Jim’s mix: Five parts well aged screened compost, 1.5 parts sharp sand, 1.5 parts rice hulls.

[I have planted a sample of each mix in the greenhouse at Camp Arroyo and I will let you know the results.]

**Planting inside:**

Either in a greenhouse or indoors preferably with grow lights – allows you to get a head start on the planting season. Jim starts most things inside in his greenhouse, including beans. He plants carrots and beets outside directly in the soil as these would be too difficult to transplant. Presoaking carrot, celery, parsley and bean seeds can be beneficial to germination.

Some seeds need light to germinate but this is not the norm and most seeds can germinate under the cover of a light layer of soil. Once germinated, seeds need light, warmth and water. A heat pad is beneficial. You can also get seeds to germinate on your water heater.

**Plant Containers:**

People use a variety of containers including 6 packs, trays with covers, berry packs with plastic clear tops. Jim introduced an interesting idea of using a large plastic flat lined with newspaper. He showed us how the plant roots mat into the soil and newspaper to form a solid base. I use polystyrene trays from Peaceful Valley Farm supply. I can plant 200 seedlings in a small space but there’s lots of transplanting into larger containers once they have germinated (but I have kid labor at Camp!). Almost any container will do as long as it is 2-3” deep and has drainage holes.

Once you have sown your seeds, tap them down lightly and cover with a thin layer of the seed starting medium. Finally cover with a thin layer of vermiculite – this protects the seedlings as they emerge from the soil and water gently either with a very fine spray watering can or a watering bell (think I have seen them in the Gardeners Supply Catalog). Some people cover the containers with plastic until they germinate. Others (including me) leave the container open. If it is cold at night in a greenhouse, you can cover the seeds with a row cover such as Agribon.

**What seeds when?**

I sent out a seed starting guide a while back. Let me know if you need another copy.

Briefly, right now, you can start seeds inside of tomatoes, peppers and eggplant. Wait until March or April to plant squash, melons and cucumbers.

Recommended Reading: New Seed Starters Handbook by Nancy Bubel

Seed to Seed by Suzanne Ashworth

Resources:

Jim has lots of rice hulls as he just ordered 80 yards so he is very willing to share. Contact Jim if you are interested.

Stable bedding is available for free at Arriba Vista Horse Ranch on Andrade Road.

Camp Arroyo has received a large donation of seeds from Renee’s Seeds. If you would like some seeds to plant for yourself and hopefully a few for our plant sale, contact Barbara Stott.