



WISCONSIN SCHOOL NUTRITION IN A NUTSHELL

The Lifecycle of Farm to School:



Seed Starting

Benefits of Starting Seeds Indoors

Food Service Benefits:

Relatively inexpensive, provides access to locally-grown foods, expands variety of menu offerings, introduces students and school staff to food service operations, provides a jump-start to growing plants that take a longer time to produce a mature harvest.

General Benefits:

Enjoyed by all ages, promotes life-long healthy eating habits, provides hands-on learning opportunities for students, fits into science and math curricula.

When Should You Start Your Seeds?

It depends! Before planting, determine your spring Frost-Free Date or the average last day of spring frost. This date will vary depending on where you live. Contact your local Extension Service office or Master Gardeners program for your area's Frost-Free Date.

Once you have determined your Frost-Free Date, count backwards to determine when to start your seeds based on their germination (grow) time and when you intend to plant your garden.

Seed Starting Supplies

- Containers: A variety of containers can be used for seed starting such as recycled milk and juice containers, yogurt cups, egg cartons, old shoes, hats, or baskets. The minimum height for containers is 2 ½ inches, with a minimum diameter of 2 inches. All containers should have drainage holes.
- Commercial Seed Starting Mix: Purchase a quality seed starting mix. Do not use garden soil as it may not provide adequate drainage and can be home to disease-causing organisms.
- Plastic bags or plastic wrap; labels and a waterproof marker; large, shallow pans (hotel pans); spray bottle or watering can
- *Optional:* plant lights, waterproof heat mats, fan

Seed Starting Video

View Seed Starting in action by watching our [Lifecycle of Farm to School Seed Starting video!](#)

Steps for Seed Starting

- 1) **Moisten the Seed Starting Mix:** Place enough seed starting mix in a bucket to fill all your containers. Add water to the mix to just moisten the soil; the soil should not be soggy. Stir the soil with your hands or a long-handled spoon.
- 2) **Fill Containers:** Fill the containers with soil and tamp (pack) the soil mix down firmly to create a level surface to the container.
- 3) **Plant Your Seeds:** Plant one type of seed per container. Make holes for the seeds with your finger or a pencil. Refer to the seed packet for instructions on planting depth and covering the seeds. After planting, label the containers with the plant type and date.
- 4) **Cover Containers:** Spritz the surface of the soil with a water bottle and cover the containers loosely with plastic wrap or a partially-closed plastic bag. Do NOT cover tightly. Place the covered containers in a warm spot (consistently 65° to 75°F).
- 5) **Watch for Germination:** Moist soil is critical for germination so, check the soil daily. Remove the plastic coverings from your containers after you see signs of germination. Young seedlings require cooler growing temperatures (ideally 60° to 65°F) so, move the containers to a cooler location and off the heat mat (if used).
- 6) **Care for Seedlings:** Continue to keep the soil moist (not soggy) and water carefully as these young plants are fragile. Move the containers to a spot with bright light once your seedlings have sprouted. In general, seedlings like 12-16 hours of light per day. Check the seed packet for the thinning distance and snip out extra plants with scissors when they are still small. Do not pull-out the plants as this can damage the root system.
- 7) **Transplanting:** Seedlings may be transplanted (moved) when they have two or more sets of true leaves but before their leaves start to overlap. Seed leaves look different than true leaves. Seed leaves sometimes have a seed coat on their tip as they grow, distinguishing them from true leaves. Use a small spoon to lift the seedlings out of the soil; pull the plants apart and untangle the roots. Plant in a larger container at the same planting depth as the container they were removed from.
- 8) **Harden off Seedlings:** Hardening off your seedlings helps to condition the plants to the outdoor elements. Start this process 7-10 days before planting outside. Begin by putting seedlings in a partially shaded spot for a few hours and gradually move to more exposed locations for longer periods of time.

Building Your Seed Starting

Gather a team who can help with your seed starting venture include parents/guardians, teachers, student groups, and community members.

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