

Gardening Indoors All Year Long

By Rachelle Chase

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Winter doesn't have to mean the end of fresh vegetables and herbs from your garden. Simply bring your garden indoors. With nothing but a windowsill, seeds, containers and the right nutrient-rich soilless mix, you can grow indoor salad greens every day of the year.

Skeptical?

I was until I met Peter Burke at an indoor gardening workshop. Burke, author of *Indoor Gardening: Seed to Salad in Seven Days*, got the idea to grow indoor salad greens from his hippie days at the Hippocrates Health Institute in Boston, growing trays of wheat grass and sunflowers. This experience planted the seed in his mind that he could grow the same things – and more – indoors on a smaller scale.

So he experimented. He started out with sprouts – seeds grown in jars or sprouters with only water and humidity. “But my kids didn't like them. They said, ‘Don't give me these seeds with salad dressing and tell me to enjoy them.’”

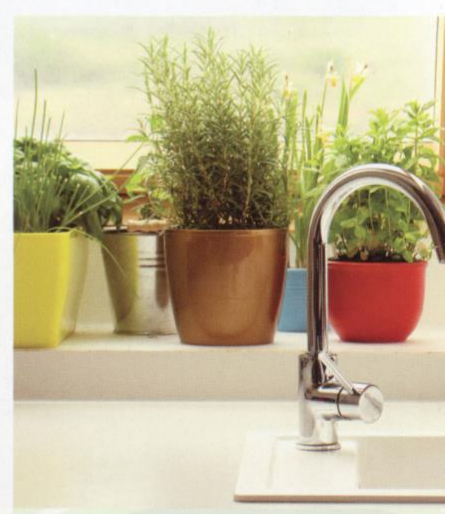
He continued experimenting, trying different seeds until he perfected his technique using a soilless mix (a mixture of vermiculite, peat moss and perlite) with natural, organic fertilizers to grow what he calls soil sprouts or shoots. Seeds are forced to grow by being kept in a moist, soilless mix and darkness for days, then put in a windowsill for a few more days and harvested when they get about 3 to 4 inches tall.

Even though he showed me the shoots he'd managed to grow, I didn't believe that I, who'd never managed more than a bucket of wimpy tomatoes and dying herbs on my patio, could do it.

Burke swears by shoots, saying, “These are for people with a brown or black thumb instead of a green thumb. No one can mess this up.”

Shockingly, he was right. I grew pea, sunflower, buckwheat, canola and radish shoots all winter long and ate them every day, loving the intense flavor. A couple pea shoots tasted like a mouthful of raw peas.

Having mastered shoots, I wondered about other vegetables like big, leafy spinach and beets. Could those be grown indoors?





Easy Seeds to Start Indoors:

- tomatoes
- peppers
- cucumbers
- squash
- zucchini
- lettuces



Elizabeth Millard, author of *Indoor Kitchen Gardening: Turn Your Home Into a Year-Round Vegetable Garden*, has been doing it for years. In 2011, she had a small bungalow in Minnesota and wanted to grow vegetables but didn't have the yard for it. "I had some open bookshelf racks in the basement, so I bought some shop lights and said, 'Let's see what grows here.'" What ended up growing were 50 flats of lettuce, kale, chard, carrots, beets and more.

The garden then spread from the basement to the kitchen and dining room. "We weren't using the table for anything other than quilting, so we used the table. We had plants all over the house." This helped her figure out what grew best where, as well as the importance of planning what you want to grow, how long it will take, what type of containers you will need and how much light will be required. In winter, even if your plants are near a sunny window, you will need artificial lighting. Ordinary full-spectrum fluorescent lighting, available at a local hardware store, works just fine.

Airflow is also important, helping plants fight off mold and pests. If weather makes opening a window unappealing, a strategically placed fan can be used.

Millard states full-grown vegetables can be grown indoors all year. "They will take longer, since it's cooler in the house, and the vegetables won't be as lush. But it is doable."

While I loved the idea of growing a variety of vegetables indoors, it felt overwhelming. "Start with lettuce," Millard says. "It's fun and easy. You can let it grow large. It grows quickly, and if you have the 'cut and come again' variety, you can eat it again in a couple of weeks."

Off I went to Earl May to get organic lettuce seeds, which are happily germinating in my kitchen cabinet. I wanted to try beets but was afraid they'd end up like the sage and basil seeds that have been in my cabinet for weeks and still haven't sprouted.

Millard advises doing a test. "Grab a few seeds and place them on a wet paper towel. If they start to germinate in a few days, then there's a good chance they'll grow inside."

Right now, I'm sticking with growing things inside. But when I'm ready to take my garden outside, I'll try starting seeds inside.

Veronica Lorson Fowler, author of *Gardening in Iowa*, is an expert on outdoor gardening. She grew up on a farm, has grown fruits, flowers and vegetables in her garden for years and has written about gardening for 20 years for major publications, including *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Country Home*.

She says one of the keys to success in starting seeds indoors is choosing easy seeds, such as tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash, zucchini, and lettuces. Many vegetables should be started in late March or early April, but check the seed packet to be sure. Fowler cautions against starting seedlings too early. "If you do, they will be long and leggy due to the lack of sunlight and may die before you get them outdoors."

Ready to start your indoor garden? Burke, Millard, and Fowler offer detailed information at their web sites:

- Peter Burke, www.thedailygardener.com for seeds, kits, and detailed instructions on growing shoots
- Elizabeth Millard, www.bossyacres.com, for more information on growing vegetables indoors
- Veronica Lorson Fowler, www.theiowagardener.com, for Iowa gardening information and newsletter sign-up **P**



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