

Garden Sages/Marge Hols

Be Seed Smart

A sign I saw the other day said, “I *must* garden.” Yes!

Right now, that translates into my springtime passion for starting seeds indoors under florescent lights—30 varieties await my attention.

By starting plants from seed, you get to choose among many more varieties and colors than you’ll find in garden centers. Bonuses are 10 plants for the price of one, tasty treats if you grow veggies and, best of all, the euphoric feeling you get when those tiny green seedlings pop up on a snowy morn.

Plants to Try

You can grow dwarf *Angelonias* from seed instead of buying pricy, cutting-grown plants. Look for the new *Angelonia* Serena series. I especially like ‘Serena White’ as an accent in pots, although the lavender, lavender pink and purple varieties perform well, too. (10-12”)

Another big breakthrough in breeding is dwarf zinnias that resist powdery mildew: daisy-flowered Profusion and dahlia-flowered Magellan. Both come in an ever-growing range of colors. I’m trying the first double-flowered Profusion, ‘Double White,’ and Magellan ‘Yellow.’ (12”-15”)

Inspired by cool-weather Egyptian gardens I saw in January, I’ve planted calendula ‘Bon Bon Yellow.’ The pale yellow, daisy flowers should complement pansies in my spring herb garden and are said to tolerate summer heat. (12”)

For containers, *Celosia* ‘Fresh Look Gold’ is a showstopper (pictured), sending up fluffy golden spires. (16”) For foliage interest, I’ve started fuzzy-leafed *Plectranthus* ‘Silver Shield’. (24”) ‘Black Pearl’ ornamental pepper will add glossy black foliage and tiny red peppers to the mix. (18”)

As a change of pace from *Salvia* ‘Victoria Blue,’ everyone’s favorite annual, I’m trying *salvia* ‘Evolution.’ (18”) The slender spires are deep purple instead of blue. I’m also experimenting with new blue/white *salvia* ‘Fairy Queen.’ (18”)



Celosia ‘Fresh Look Gold’

For containers and garden beds, I can’t do without my standbys: *Ageratum* ‘Leilani Blue,’ geranium ‘Black Velvet Rose,’ *petunia* ‘Primetime Light Blue’ and ‘Prism Sunshine,’ *salvia* ‘Mini Victoria,’ and snapdragon ‘Ribbon Yellow’ and ‘Ribbon Rose.’

Petunia, snapdragon and mini *salvia* seeds are from www.stokeseed.com. All other seeds are from www.parkseed.com.

Growing Tips

Start most vegetable and annual flower seeds mid-March to mid-April, 4 to 8 weeks before planting outdoors. Start perennial seeds anytime this spring because plants probably won’t bloom the first year anyway.

Sterilize plastic seed packs and trays to reduce the chance young seedlings will “damp off” and die from disease. Soak packs 20 minutes in 9 parts water to 1 part bleach. Plant seeds in packs in pre-moistened, sterile seed-starting mix. Follow directions on seed packet for how deep to plant seeds and required temperature range.

Hang florescent shop lights from hooks in basement ceiling studs. Place a card table or other table under lights. Hook lights to chains (available by the yard) so you can raise them as plants grow. Keep lights 4 inches above plants. Use cool white florescent bulbs.

Grow seeds under lights unless seed packet says they need dark to germinate. Keep soil damp, but not soggy, by bottom watering. Provide air circulation with a fan and keep air temperature at 68 to 75 degrees for most seeds. Once seedlings emerge, feed with ¼-strength water soluble fertilizer. Transplant seedlings to small pots when they have 2 or 3 sets of true leaves (not counting first seed leaves, called cotyledons).

Harden off seedlings for 10 days before planting outdoors in late May or early June. Expose them gradually to outdoor conditions, starting in part shade for 1 or 2 hours a day.