

Questions often asked by beginner gardeners



Renee's Six Do's and One Don't for a Good Garden

#1: **Don't** Sow Your Seeds or Set out Seedlings Too Early!



Be strong: resist the temptation to sow your garden on the first warm spring weekend! Heat-loving summer annuals will not thrive and grow well until the soil has warmed up and spring weather conditions are warm and settled with outdoor night temperatures consistently in the 50 degree (10 C) range. This includes summer flower favorites like zinnias, sunflowers, morning glories and cosmos, heat loving herbs like all basil, oregano and thyme, and all the many fruiting summer vegetables such as pole and bush beans, summer and winter squash, cucumbers, corn, melons and watermelons, peppers, pumpkins and

tomatoes. Read our [seed packet backs](#) to find out when to sow seeds if you are not sure.

While it's sadly true that many nurseries sell started tomato plants much before this spring weather standard, there's no advantage to planting seedlings out when all they will do is shiver until the weather warms. Good gardeners know that you'll get excellent results when the weather is right, and poor or no seed germination if the soil is too cold and poor stressed plants if you plant seedlings out too early. Rest assured that seeds planted when conditions are warm enough will catch up and surpass stressed plants that were planted early. Don't be fooled by one or two warm weekends -- wait until the weather has truly warmed up for the season to plant.

If you want to get out in the garden when an early patch of nice weather feels irresistible, use the time to improve your soil and you will benefit all season. There's really no advantage to buying seedlings of warm season vegetables and flowers to get an early start. If you wait until weather conditions are right, you can sow seeds directly in the garden and they will catch and even surpass those early planted seedlings because they experience no disturbance or transplant shock.



If you are determined to start early, be prepared to give your tender seedlings extra protection. This means using hot caps, "Walls -O -Water", black or colored plastic soil covers, or other devices to protect them from cold nights and chilly mornings.

#Two: **Do Thin to the Proper Spacing**

Our seed packet backs give both the initial distance apart for sowing seeds and also tell you the final spacing to grow them after they have germinated into seedlings. Specifically, thinning to the final spacing means that you take out extra seedlings that have germinated too close together, leaving only those that are at the proper distance apart so they have enough space to thrive and grow to maturity. Do not neglect to thin your seedlings out to the suggested final spacing. Give away or compost the extra seedlings you take out. Over and over, I've seen proof of the incontrovertible fact that unthinned crowded plants just won't grow or produce well and are more disease prone.

While it's hard to acquire the habit of thinning out the seedlings we have nurtured along, it is critical to a successful and healthy garden. Unthinned seedlings can never reach their potential. The crowded plants inevitably tangle together and do not thrive or prosper in the way properly spaced plants do. Properly thinned, evenly spaced plants have the room they need to grow and mature and bear the harvests you expect.



#3: **Do build good soil**



There is a very simple gardening Golden Rule: the better the condition of your soil, the better garden you will have! The best way is to work several inches of organic material into your garden soil to improve its balance, texture, and water-holding capacity. Use aged manure, rotted leaves, peat moss, compost (the best!) or whatever kind of organic material is available in your area. Adding organic material benefits all soil types sandy soil will hold more water; clay soil will be friable and less compacted, so add it before you plant each new crop as well as at the end of the season. Good soil is essential to having a productive garden.

#4: Do Fertilize Both Organic and Conventional Gardens

Even if you have good soil with a high organic content, remember that most plants need supplementary nutrition in the form of fertilizer for best growth and to produce the abundant harvests we all desire. Whatever product you choose to feed your plants, they should have a constant and adequate supply, especially in sandy soils. Plan to feed monthly at prescribed regular intervals throughout the growing season as it really can make a big difference in getting successful, high yielding plants.

A good rule of thumb is to use a high nitrogen fertilizer during active growth. Then during flowering or fruiting, switch to a low nitrogen, high potassium-phosphorous fertilizer. There are many excellent organic fertilizers available now in both liquid and granular formulations. As longtime organic gardeners, a good, all-purpose, tried and true combination we still rely on is: 1 tablespoon each liquid fish emulsion and liquid kelp per gallon of water.

#5: Do Read Packet Backs First



I take great pride and put much care into writing our [seed packet backs](#) myself based on actual experience growing each variety in our trial gardens. The extra flap on the back of the packet is your description of the variety. The text on the back of each packet is my best shot in 237 words or less, explaining how to plant, care and harvest the variety. We really try our very best to provide the information you'll need to be successful. Please don't neglect to use this information as a growing guide, especially if you are a new or beginning gardener.

If you lose the paper packet after planting the seeds, remember you can always review the information on the packet by clicking on that variety in our [online catalog](#) and then clicking on the link "more info". Please do also scroll through "[Renee's Articles](#)" to look at other how to info. and help we provide.

#6: Do Store Extra Seed Properly

Many gardeners have asked how to store leftover, unused seeds. Renees Garden and other good seed companies seeds come to you with high germination rates, and most varieties will keep easily for the next growing seasons. (Several exceptions: onions, parsley, and lettuces do not always maintain their germination and are best purchased fresh each year.) The worst enemies of successful seed storage are humidity and heat. Never leave leftover seed packets outside in the garden or garage or in an unheated outdoor shed, because high humidity and dampness will ruin them. A sealed mason jar or freezer-weight ziplock bag is an ideal storage container. Keep seeds dry and in your coolest room. Plan to use them the next season.



#7: **Do** Think in Terms of Early, Main and Late Season Vegetable Harvests

Our vegetable seed packet charts indicate days to harvest for many varieties of seed. They are best used only as a general recommendation, because in our garden trials we have found that soil, weather, and cultural conditions can vary widely from one area to another, even between microclimates in one town. It's helpful to use early, mid-season, and late-season harvest notations on the packet backs as a general guide in comparing different varieties of the same vegetables and in planning successive harvests, rather than using days to maturity as absolute indicators of growing time. You can also refer to our handy [When to Plant Chart](#) and our [Kitchen Garden Designs](#). If you want to know how to judge if vegetables are ready to harvest, just check our article: [Harvesting Vegetables for Best Flavor](#).

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