

How to start healthy seedlings indoors

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
BDN STAFF

BELFAST — The topsy-turvy weather this winter can make you step outside and wonder whether the calendar pages flipped from February to April overnight.

That unaccustomed warmth can make home gardeners start thinking seriously about the next season in the garden, including taking the hopeful winter step of starting seedlings indoors to transplant outside later.

Alison Jewett of Troy said her windowsills already are home to green bean seedlings that have stretched 2 or 3 inches toward the sun already. The seedlings were her 8-year-old daughter's school project, and the experiment's positive outcome was not a forgone conclusion, the

Belfast bank teller said.

"I was amazed to see they're actually growing," she said. "We will have green beans early this year."

For those who would like some more precise tips for starting their seedlings, Mary Bulan, the director of Unity College's McKay Farm & Research Station in Thorndike, has several ideas. Also, the helpful experts at the University of Maine Cooperative Extension have put together a handy bulletin about starting seeds at home that is full of good tips for gardeners.

"When seeds first germinate, many of them don't need light but they certainly need heat," Bulan said, adding that the ideal germination temperature is usually higher than what the mature crop will need. "They

will germinate at lower temperatures, but you want vigorous plants. You want to get everything up and going, not to waste a lot of energy under the soil."

In addition to a warm space, home gardeners need good seeds and will want to make sure they put the seeds in the proper potting soil that will allow for drainage, aeration and nutrients.

"Some people just take dirt out of their yard. They might not get the success they'd like," Bulan said. "Topsoil might not have the same lightness of a potting mix."

Once the healthy seeds have been tucked into a good potting mix and have germinated, they can be fine in a sunny window with southern exposure, she said.

"Don't let them dry out,

ever," Bulan cautioned. "I think watering is an underappreciated art."

Lettuce can be a reliable plant to start ahead of time, as is basil. Other crops — especially tomatoes and peppers — can be challenging to start without a greenhouse. Some crops, including squashes, don't like to be transplanted and ought to be started from seeds, she said.

All seedlings that have been started indoors ought to be "hardened off" before they are transplanted into the garden.

"If they've been completely coddled, and you set them right in the ground, they might not make it," she said. "Bring the seedlings out. If it's warm enough, leave them out overnight. You let them experience the full sun and the wind."

Winter

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ra Damrosch literally wrote the book — or, rather, several books — on winter gardening in Maine. The two wrote "The Winter Harvest Handbook," "Four Season Harvest," "The New Organic Grower" and a cookbook.

"If you are going to earn a living gardening in Maine, you need a slightly longer season than the weather allows," Coleman said. "So we started pushing the end of the season."

The couple began with a simple greenhouse, then added cold frames inside the structure.

"Outside it was Maine in the winter, but the greenhouse moves you 500 miles to the south [and] the cold frames added another 500 miles," he said. "So the stuff in there were actually in Georgia."

Now crops such as spinach, Swiss chard, kale and lettuce are started inside the greenhouse in the fall and harvested all winter.

When temperatures outside really dip below freezing, Coleman said, the greens will freeze at night but warm up in time for harvest the next morning.

"They are harvestable and delicious," he said. "When these vegetables grow in cooler temperatures, they are just sweeter."

"By having a greenhouse, I'm adding 60 days to my growing season."

JAMES DELANCY,
RANKIN RAPIDS FARM

The couple sells their produce, which also includes radishes and turnips, at the weekly Blue Hill Winter Farmers Market on Saturdays at Mainescape Nursery, part of a thriving Maine winter farmers market network.

"It's really fun because nobody expects seeing vegetables in the winter," Coleman said. "It's really more fun than the summer markets."

At Sunset Farms Organics in Lyman, farmer Paul Lorrain is a fan of Coleman and winter gardening.

Lorrain said he got into winter farming about 17 years ago at his wife's suggestion, when lack of snow was impacting his snow-removal business.

"My wife wanted me to find something to do in the middle of a no-snow winter," he said. "I read an article on Eliot Coleman and visited him, and he became my mentor."

Lorrain started with one greenhouse and today has a dozen filled with lettuce, kale, Swiss chard and other salad greens which he sells to several area markets.

"I'm growing the same things our grandparents did in cold frames next to their houses," he said.

More than 350 miles to the north, James Delancy of Rankin Rapids Farm in St. Francis, was working his new greenhouse this week.

On a recent morning outside it was 8 degrees with a steady snowfall. Inside, the unfinished, unheated space attached to his house was a comfortable 60 degrees.

"It's extremely important to have something like a greenhouse up here in northern Maine," Delancy said. "By having them, I'm adding 60 days to my growing season."

Last year Delancy was



DAN BIRT

Dan Birt's Millinocket home was getting taken over by cucumbers thanks to the 92-year-old master gardener's winter growing skills. Birt plans to plant close to 4,000 onion seeds in the coming days, says he enjoys giving away most of his produce to friends and neighbors.

able to grow sweet potatoes in his greenhouse, a tuber for which the area's growing season is far too short.

"I also grew some peanuts as an experiment," he said. "I did not sell any this year but hope to next season."

Delancy is building the greenhouse on what had been his home's deck, something he called "the most useless piece of equipment in northern Maine."

Instead of a structure usable in the brief period between the true colds and bug season, the deck is enclosed and insulation being placed in the walls. Rankin Rapids produces enough vegetables for Delancy to sell at the Fort Kent Farmers' Market, and he hopes the additional greenhouse will increase and extend his production.

Winter slows down but doesn't stop growing

Conventional wisdom, according to those who grow winter vegetables in Maine, suggests you need at least 10 hours of daylight for plants to grow.

In Maine, that ends around Nov. 5 and does not pass the 10 hour mark again until early February.

"For me, once the sunlight goes under 10 hours things really slow down," Lorrain said. "If I'm picking my Swiss chard once a week at the end of October, come December I'm picking every three weeks. Growth does not stop, but it really slows down."

Things have not slowed down much at all at the Regional School Unit 39 greenhouses, where agriculture and natural resources instructor Casey Cote and her students at the Caribou Regional Technology Center operate a greenhouse that produces enough lettuce and tomatoes to supply the high school's salad bar.

"Our goal is to get the plants to be 75 percent mature by the time the shortest day of the year comes along," Cote said. "After that, we do use artificial light, but we have been weening the plants off that as we approach 10



ELIOT COLEMAN

Using a combination of row covers and greenhouses allows Eliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch to produce fresh vegetables year-round. The couple has penned several books on winter gardening and harvesting.

hours of natural daylight."

Getting them to that 75 percent maturation point, she said, ensures the plants have the strength to make it through the shorter days.

"We really see a difference when they start getting the natural light," Cote said. "There is new growth, and they really perk up."

Back in Millinocket, Dan Birt has two 4-foot bulbs for his greenhouse that he says cost around \$57 per month to operate.

"You got to have light," he said. "And yeah it costs a bit extra, but when you [have] a hobby, it costs you money."

A longtime master gardener, Birt's "hobby" is his friends' and neighbors' windfall.

"I mostly give my vegetables away," he said. "I could have had more cucumbers this winter, but they were

taking up too much space, so I took them out."

He replaced the cucumbers with tomatoes and already are ripening.

"Everybody likes them," he said. "I'm very popular, and people can't understand how I get these vegetables [and] ask if I grew them outdoors."

Birt's favorite veggie to grow and eat are onions. This weekend he plans to put in nearly 4,000 onion seeds.

"I'll end up giving away most of those 4,000 onion plants," he said. "I really do enjoy it [because] in the morning you can look and see your plants growing in the winter."

A list of winter farmers markets in Maine can be seen at mainefarmersmarkets.org/shoppers/winter-markets-2015-2016.



GABOR DEGRE | BDN

A modular greenhouse used by G.W. Martin as a shelter to build panels for customers.

Martin

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ses by stretching clear plastic over a poplar frame. When he first thought the idea of constructing modular greenhouses built with an easily-found Maine wood might be a concept worth pursuing, he began advertising within the medicinal marijuana community, which he's long supported. The greenhouses were a hit, and so he took them to the Common Ground Fair in nearby Unity, where people all over the state could check them out.

"Then it was just game on," Martin said. "The greenhouse business is an unbelievable explosion."

He doesn't have a website for his wares — a decision he made because he doesn't want demand to outstrip his ability to build the supply. Instead, Martin sells his greenhouses, and what he calls "open source greenhouse technology," through lower-tech word of mouth advertising and by having would-be buyers call him over the phone. He dreams of one day having people use a version of the structures

as low-cost housing that heats itself only with the sun.

For now, he uses greenhouses in various sizes on his property — perhaps a dozen of them altogether — to dry firewood, start seedlings and to make warm work spaces for the winters.

Martin said that this summer he is hoping to rent greenhouse space to medicinal marijuana patients who will take advantage of his security and rich compost mix to grow their own plants.

"The best money to be made in the state of Maine in the marijuana industry is renting spots on old farms to grow medicinal marijuana," he said. "These old dairy farms, especially, have bountiful amounts of so-called black gold."

While Hogback Mountain Farm is a busy place of many diverse enterprises, for Martin they all help point him and his family in one direction.

"We get more for our time and energy when we teach and help somebody," he said. "We all gain as a community."

For information about Martin's greenhouses, call him at 505-1271.



TROY R. BENNETT | BDN

The 19th century barn at 441 Route 1 in York, used as a hardware store for the last 30 years, is slowly transforming into Wiggly Bridge Distillery's second location. The distillery open at York Beach in 2013.

Barn

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Now that he's nearing completion, he admits refurbishing an old barn for modern use "is a money pit."

"It would've been cheaper to tear it down and start over," said Woods, but the York man wanted to protect the utilitarian strength and dignity of the historic barn. "I hate seeing them being torn down."

Across the state reclaimed salvage companies are knocking down barns fast. Barn boards, beams and pillars are sought-after elements for home design.

"They are just being decimated all over the place. We are turning into a vanilla society, and it makes me nauseous," said Woods.

The carpenter on this job, Adam Stevens, admitted these gigs are increasingly rare in Southern Maine.

"Barn restoration is a dying thing. Most of the time we are tearing them down," said Stevens.

This barn's hemlock ceiling, well-worn floors and experienced pillars are getting the reverse treatment. In the far corner where horse stalls

once stood, a new tasting bar will soon attract aficionados. Though the counter is new, the front of the bar is made of galvanized sheeting and old floorboards. The floor in the tasting area was rotted and replaced with hemlock planks.

"I didn't want it to look new," said Woods, gesturing to the well-worn wooden floor beneath his feet. It will be washed, but not buffed or replaced. "Let it show its age," said Woods.

And speaking of age, the former root cellar below is now lined with new American white oak barrels filled with aging spirits. Surrounded by earthen rock, the scene calls to mind the caves of old-world wine vineyards. It's hard to imagine a more perfect setting for a spirits cellar.

Manure and hay used in the foundation "may influence some of the stuff in the wood; it could change our profile," said David Woods, who is not alarmed, but rather intrigued by the possibility.

For his son, working in a barn "feels like home."

Added his father, "it's like an old pair of slippers."

Just like their spirits, "this building needs conditioning."

Somerset County Extension calendar

University of Maine's Somerset County Cooperative Extension Homemakers, which extends adult education on the topics of food safety, nutrition and health, gardening, cultural and creative arts, financial planning and going green, lists its February calendar of events:

— Heart Fund bake sale, 8 a.m.-noon Saturday, Feb. 13, Cambridge Town Hall.

— In Stitches Sewing School, 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 17, Methodist Church Fellowship Hall, Clinton.

— Felted Mittens, 9:30 a.m. Thursday, Feb. 18, pri-

vate home, Madison.

— Dine out, 11:30 a.m. Tuesday, Feb. 9, Kel-Met in Skowhegan.

— Energy, 10:30 a.m. Tuesday, Feb. 9, private home, Ripley.

These programs are all open to the public.

Individual groups have community service projects for veterans, families in need, donating to food cupboards, shelters and fundraising for various charities. The Maine state project is "Blast from the Past". Somerset County has the 1920s decade.

For information, contact the Somerset County Extension office at 474-9622 or 1-800-287-1495, at TDD 1-800-287-8957 or www.extension.umaine.edu.