



Urban Harvest

Troubleshooting your Vegetable Seedlings

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In the upcoming weeks, we need to be planting many of the great vegetables that will make May, June and July great eating months. Except in the colder parts of the area, it is already too late for tomato transplants, but both sweet pepper transplants and chiles will do just fine if planted now. Even novice gardeners do fairly well with pepper transplants. But most of the good eating veggies need to be grown from seed, and in details there are often problems.

These last two days I have been planting sweet corn in five rows of five plants spaced a foot apart, and in a few weeks I will do that again, and in a few weeks after that I will do that again and so forth until I run out of space, or it gets to be late June.

Next I will plant snap beans, both vining ones on wire cages and bush, and soon thereafter, in will go squashes, then Edamame soy, and then cucumbers and cantaloupes.

Most vegetable gardeners plan, get their seed and with high hopes then do pretty much the same thing. Yet unhappily sometimes not much results from all this hope, planning and effort. For two decades I have heard the complaints: "Nothing came up." Or "Something ate them." Here I want to address these serious concerns.

Nothing Comes Up!

There are really four possibilities here: the seed is dead, you planted too deeply, the seed sprouted and then dried out and died, or it started growing and then something ate it.

It is fairly easy to test as to whether the seed is dead, at least if you have any left. Get a damp paper towel, put ten seeds or so on it, roll up the towel, bend it in half, and let it sit in a warm place keeping it damp in an open plastic container until the seeds sprout — a few days or longer. Seeds die quickly when it is hot (on the dashboard of a pickup) or damp (in your workpants pocket) and last a long time in a dry container in the refrigerator. Big seeds generally live longer than small ones.

Generally, seeds need to be planted in loose water-retaining soil about three times as deep as the shortest diameter of the seed. Seeds light enough to blow in the wind should be put on the soil surface and gently patted down. If you plant too deep, the sprout may not make it up and if you plant too shallow, it may dry out or may not have enough soil around its stem.

In spring, the soil generally stays damp so it is unlikely that the seed sprouted and then died of thirst, but this is common in summer and fall when insufficient watering can kill lots of vegetable sprouts.

Something Ate Them!

If the seeds are alive, planted in good soil at the right depth, and kept damp until they establish deep roots, then it is almost certain that your young seedlings were eaten by something, even if they aren't big enough yet for you to see the damage. This time of year there are many possible culprits: snails, slugs, various insect larvae ("grubs"), and birds are the most common culprits.

All of these can be kept off by covering the newly planted seed bed with very lightweight spun polyester floating row cover weighted down on the edges with boards or stones. These row covers are fairly cheap and available widely at local garden supply stores and by Internet

from **www.groworganic.com**, **www.dripworks.com** and **www.johnnyseeds.com**.

Row cover is really the only effective solution for vegetable beds where there are a lot of seedlings planted, but they also have a drawback — you can't see the young sprouts so can't easily see if anything is bothering them.

If, on the other hand, you are only planting a few seeds, sprouts or transplants say for squash, cucumbers, melons, or perhaps corn, there are some other solutions that are better. Most longtime gardeners have way too many one-gallon garden pots and may even have some old wire fencing. By cutting the bottoms off the pots with pruning shears or hacksaw, one can create durable plastic plant guards that will strongly discourage any crawling pests from attacking the young seedlings. And by putting the

fencing over the pots, birds have no chance of eating the young sprouts. An additional benefit is that neighborhood cats cannot scratch up the planting.

Although cutting the pots is a lot of work, they last a lifetime and do the job exceptionally well.

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