April 14, 2021 – from Exeter Area Garden Club <eagcnhseedlibrary@gmail.com

Yes, it will be cold, rainy, windy, possibly snowy tomorrow. No better time to start planting those warmer weather seeds that need a head start before planting outside! Seeds that have start dates of 4 – 6 weeks before the last frost, like tomatoes, annual zinnias, etc. should be planted now so that they have enough time to set fruit and flowers. The average last frost date in NH is May 15, but often there is still the risk of a frost before the end of May. This month, the last full moon is at the end of May and those clear full moon nights can be notorious for a last frost. To be on the safe side, you will hear many gardeners say the safer time to plant warm weather plants is Memorial Day.

Seed starting can be successful if you have the tools and knowledge. You will need to have a tray with containers or “cells” you can fill with seed starting soil or peat pellets for planting. You will have the best success if you have grow lights and a fan to best mimic outside growing conditions. Seed starting soil is not really soil but a combination of materials like peat, perlite and compost that is sterile and will not give fungus to young plants. Make sure your seed starting soil is moistened BEFORE putting it into planting containers and planting seeds. If you are reusing plastic seed cells, make sure to sterilize them with a 9 parts water to 1 part bleach solution to eliminate any possible contamination of your starts.

Plant only a couple of seeds per container in the soil no more than double the depth of the seed. This means tiny cherry tomato seeds should barely have any soil on top of them, too deep and they may never germinate. While some seeds may require light to germinate most do not. Most importantly, what they DO need is to stay moist. Immediately after planting seeds in your soil mixture, cover them with either a humidity dome or some plastic wrap. While waiting for your seeds to germinate, there is no need to water the containers.

Check your seeds morning and night and as soon as you see any sign of growth, remove the wrap or dome and put yours seeds into light with a gentle fan blowing on them. Your light should be no more than two inches above the soil so your plants to not become “leggy” reaching for the light. Lights and fans should stay on 14-16 hours a day, and off at night so plants can rest.

Once seeds get their second set of leaves, known as their true leaves, they have used up the energy that was stored in the seed and now need to be regularly fertilized and thinned. Thin to one plant per container by using small scissors to cut, not pull, extra plants out of the cells so that roots are not disturbed. An organic fish emulsion is a good choice. Use the fertilizer at ¼ of the strength called for full size plant, increasing the amount to ½ strength once plants grow a few inches. Ideally the best way to water seedlings is from the bottom, so roots go down to look for water. But do not let containers sit in water because this may cause seedlings stems to rot from “damping off.”

Roots need a period of time to dry a bit and breath to become strong and healthy, similar to what they would face in a garden situation with weather. However, with fans running on plants, they can dry out quickly so it is important to check plants daily. Touch the soil to see if it is becoming too dry and watch for any sign of drooping plants.

If weather is warm outside (70 degrees or better) you can always bring your seedlings outside for a bit, making sure they are not in direct sun. About a week before planting, you will need to harden off your plants so they can become acclimated to outdoor conditions. Do not skip this step. It is important for seedlings to gradually be exposed to sunlight and wind. Start by placing seedlings outside in shade and gradually give them more sun every day. Do not plant if a strong storm is expected shortly after planting. Plants can always temporarily be protected by an overturned pot in case of a weather situation like a driving rain or frost.

Good luck with your seed starting and remember to save some seeds to return to the Seed Library! The Exeter Area Garden Club thanks you for being a member!