

Transfer Your Seedlings to Safety (aka Hardening off)

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Whether started at home on a sunny windowsill or transported from commercial greenhouses to your local nursery, seedlings that have been nurtured and coddled indoors are in for a shock if they're planted outside right away. Without being gradually acclimatized to outdoor conditions, young plants can be nipped by frost, pummeled by wind and pelted by rainstorms. With a little patience and care, though, you can toughen them up so they can withstand the weather. Here's how to do it.

When to start

Knowing when to start moving seedlings outdoors depends on the type of plant as well as local climate conditions. Most annuals and perennial seedlings can be exposed to the outdoors when all danger of frost has passed. This varies from region to region, so consult Environment Canada's Frost Dates Chart for dates in your area. Some plants, including tomatoes and peppers, prefer warmer conditions, so wait to move these until daytime temperatures are consistently above 18 to 20°C.

Where to site the seedlings

Find a sheltered spot in the yard to set out pots or flats of seedlings. A place under a tree, for example, that's shaded from the direct rays of the sun and protected from the wind, is ideal. Cold frames or commercially available mini-greenhouses are good options, too. Be sure sites are close to the door so it's quick and easy to move your seedlings in and out.

On the first day, expose seedlings to the outdoors for only one or two hours before moving them back inside. During the week, gradually increase their exposure by a few hours each day until they remain outdoors all day. During this time, gradually increase their exposure to sun and wind, too, moving them into more open areas day by day, but sheltering them if the weather worsens.

At the end of a week or two, the seedlings should be ready for transplanting to the garden.

Transplanting tips

Choose a still, overcast day to protect the young plants from the drying effects of sun and wind. Before transplanting, water the seedlings in their pots.

Dig holes in the garden wide and deep enough to generously accommodate each young plant, adding a handful of compost to the bottom. Fill the holes with water, allowing them to drain completely before planting the seedlings.

Gently remove the young plants from their pots or cell packs (gently tease out the bottoms of dense rootballs to encourage them to spread out). Set seedlings in the planting holes so their crowns sit level with the ground – not too high and not too low. Once planted, water the seedlings with a transplant solution, such as 5-15-5 or liquid kelp, according the package directions.

Mulch the soil around each plant with shredded bark, compost or leaf mould to conserve moisture and help suppress weeds. Water plants when the upper three centimetres of soil becomes dry. If a sudden cold snap threatens, protect transplants with cloches, upturned bushel baskets, floating row covers or blankets.

With a little care and patience, your seedlings will grow into strong, healthy plants for you to enjoy all season long.