

Horticultural Tip: Damping Off and Leggy Seedlings

If you (unlike me) actually began your indoor seed starting on time this year, then you may be just about ready to experience a couple of problems that sometimes pop up along with those beautiful green babies. Whether you chose special seed-starting kits, complete with humidity domes, capillary mats, and cozy warm heat pads to nudge those seeds along, or if you used the yogurt cups or toilet-roll cores you hoarded all year in your garage (you know who you are...), and filled them with your own lovely mixture of coir, vermiculite, sterile compost, and perlite, we're all susceptible to a few common seed-starting problems that are disheartening, if not panic-provoking, when they strike.

You've carefully tucked seeds in at the right depth, you've provided a nice sunny window or some fluorescent shop lights, you've watered thoughtfully, mostly from below, and you've watched the babies poke their little heads up through the soil and grow like mad for a week or two. And then, one of two things happen: 1) They suddenly keel over and die, as if cut off at ground level by some invisible scissor, or 2) They KEEP growing toward the light, the window, the ceiling, until they're so tall and top-heavy, they flop over and begin crawling along the surface of their neighbors' pots.

The first culprit, known as "damping-off," is actually a fungus that thrives in the warm, moist environment you've created for your seedlings. Sometimes it shows up first as a fuzzy white substance on the surface of the soil. I've experimented with lots of remedies over the years, and here are a few suggestions that have worked for me.

1. Spray seedlings with room temp chamomile tea (I use 2 teabags/cup of water) every 3-5 days.
2. Sprinkle the soil at the base of the plant with ground cinnamon.
3. At planting, sprinkle a bit of fine poultry grit on top of the soil (drains fast and dries quickly).
4. Point an oscillating fan (on low setting) at the seedlings...this mimics natural breeze and airflow.
5. If you're re-using your seed starting pots (or yogurt cups), sterilize them by soaking in 1/10 bleach solution before planting.

The second problem is Leggy Seedling Syndrome (my name for it). For me, it tends to happen when I overplant a pot with way too many seeds...a temptation I find hard to resist since, when I'm planting, I always think I'll have "plenty of time" to thin and trim each one of those hundreds of tiny pots. Never happens. Other than curbing my enthusiasm at planting time or taking the time to cut off all but one or two plants in each pot with a sharp, clean scissor (life and death decisions...not my favorite thing), here are a few suggestions that will help if you have those tall, lanky babies waving at you from under your grow-lights:

1. The oscillating fan trick above helps with this, too, as the flexing of the stems causes them to put energy into growing thicker instead of taller.

2. Hold back on the fertilizer...no feed at all until two sets of real leaves and, if you've got compost in your seed starting soil, you can wait until you put the plantlets in the ground to feed.
3. If you're using overhead lights (fluorescent bulbs work fine...I use one "warm" and one "cool" in my shop lights...those "daylight" bulbs are expensive and not necessary), keep them 1-2 inches above the top leaves of the seedlings.
4. Run your hands over the tops of the seedlings whenever you can...many times a day, if possible. Not only does this flex the stems to encourage thicker growth, it will really put you in "touch" with your seedling babies! Win-Win!

Next time, we'll talk about Spring pruning. Let me know if there are specific plants you'd like information about, and I'll poke around online and in my files to see if I can help.