

Grow plants under lights for spare time rewards

By Mel Robinson

Although people have been growing plants under fluorescent lights since the 1960s, the possibilities of this fascinating hobby have scarcely been touched.

Take greens, for instance. I have been able to keep our table well supplied with beautiful green lettuce and garden cress all year round for several years now. They are not difficult to grow.

Nevertheless I know of very few people who do not remain dependent on the farm laborers in the southern states and truckers for their supply of table greens during the cooler months.

If you grow your own bedding plants under lights, you can have your choice of an amazing variety of annuals such as petunias, alyssum, snapdragons, marigolds and zinnias. But most people continue to depend upon the limited selection offered by greenhouses.

It is a fascinating experience to watch seeds germinate, to watch the little seedlings develop. The satisfaction of growing your own greens, bedding plants, and cuttings under lights makes it a very rewarding occupation for spare time.

Perhaps it may seem too time-consuming. Actually it is not. I spend less than an hour each week growing our greens during the fall, winter and spring. To grow upwards of 1,500 bedding plants each year for our own garden and for relatives and friends the time involved is from a few minutes each day in February and March to less than an hour each day in April, May and June.

I believe some people may have trouble with the temperature in their basements. Some are too cool. Many people do not have a basement. It is not necessary to grow plants under lights in the basement. It can be done in a cool bedroom with an

Use water wisely

By John Hughes
Ontario Ministry of
Agriculture and Food

Many homeowners get quite a surprise when they get their summer water bill, especially if a sewer surcharge is added in their municipality.

There are several ways to help conserve water and still enjoy the pleasures of a green lawn, fruitful gardens and beautiful flowers. Simply, water more thoroughly and less often since roots grow the way you train them.

If plants receive a shallow (light) watering, they develop shallow roots. This kind of root structure demands frequent watering as the top two inches of soil dry out quite rapidly.

east or north window.

One mistake that can discourage a beginner is a failure to elevate the plant boxes close enough to the lights. The result is weak spindly plants. The top of the foliage should not be more than four or five inches from the lighting tubes. Seeds and young seedlings should be even closer. Some have difficulty because they cover the seeds with too much earth. Many seeds germinate best if

they are scattered loosely, then patted lightly to bring them into contact with the moist soil. They can be kept moist with frequent spraying or with water applied with a small watering can. The water should be allowed to reach room temperature before it is used.

I start most of my seeds on the soil in two-inch pots. This gives great control over their environment during

germination. After the tiny seedlings stand erect with their two little seed leaves, I lift them out of the soil gently with a 2½" nail. Each is set in a small peat pot or one section of a jiffy strip. Some of them are unbelievably small, but they rapidly establish themselves if kept close to the lighting.

Perhaps the most discouraging thing for some who have tried this hobby is damping off. This may be caused by air that is too cool, or by too much watering, but it is mostly because of the soil. You use so little, that it does not pay to economize on this factor. Buy potting soil that has been sterilized. That eliminates the problems of weeds and plant diseases. It is the best way to eliminate damping off.

One more thing. Do not try to grow things in any such arrangement as a plastic tent. This is apparently done to hold heat and moisture in the growing area. I have never done this. I believe it tends to produce weak, tender plants if the process is not carefully controlled.

You will probably do better with a less elaborate arrangement—one which allows a very gentle movement of air around the plants. Air that ranges near 20 degrees C. and with about 10 points of a relative humidity of 50 seems to be a good environment for your plants.



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