Transplant Production

Greenhouse

Transplant production has replaced direct seeding for many vegetable crops. One of transplanting's primary advantages is earlier fruit production, allowing growers to capture better market conditions. In addition, the high cost of hybrid seed makes it desirable to use each seed as efficiently as possible. Transplanting also gives the crops a competitive advantage against weeds. This section addresses the special skills and knowledge required for successful transplant production.

Most growers use polyethylene-covered greenhouse structures to provide warmth and protection from the environment. Although cole crops do not need the more moderating conditions a greenhouse provides, they can be grown in coldframes, lean-tos, or covered wagon beds.

The heater is one of the most critical features of a transplant greenhouse. Vegetable transplants must be kept at the appropriate temperatures. However, if heaters are improperly exhausted, the transplants can be stunted or deformed. To prevent heater fumes from returning into the greenhouse, chimneys should extend two feet above the ridge of the greenhouse.

There should be some provision for bringing fresh air into the greenhouse. Some heaters vent fresh air into the greenhouse every time the furnace operates. For others, a hole or holes should be cut in the greenhouse wall and fitted with tubes to feed outside air to the heater. Avoid space heaters that may "spit" diesel or gasoline onto nearby plants. Heated air should be circulated using a perforated "sock" or tube that runs the length of the greenhouse, or fans placed on opposite sides of the greenhouse and blowing in opposite directions. Place thermometers in several locations to measure the temperature at plant level. At least one high-low thermometer is a good investment.

For detailed information on greenhouse structures, write to the address below and ask for the publication, *Greenhouse Engineering* (NRAES-33):

Northeast Regional Agricultural Engineering Service
PO Box 4557
152 Riley-Robb Hall
Cooperative Extension
Ithaca, NY 14853-4557.

Transplant Containers

A wide variety of transplant containers are available, each with advantages and disadvantages. The most common ones are:

1. Todd planter trays made of Styrofoam (Speedling type)
2. Polystyrene or PVC flats or trays
3. Peat strips, pots or pellets (e.g., Jiffy)

Peat pot containers have the advantage that the root system need not be disturbed upon planting. This is important in crops such as cucurbits that are sensitive to root disturbance. Peat pots also are more forgiving of over watering than other containers. However, peat pots have to be reordered every year. If peat pots are planted partially above ground, moisture is "wicked" away from the plant, often resulting in plant death — peat pellets do not have this disadvantage.

An advantage of the polystyrene and Todd planter flats is that they may be used for several years. Polystyrene and Todd planter flats are both designed so that transplants must be "popped" out of the trays, thus disturbing the root system. This is particularly true if the roots are allowed to grow into the ground beneath the tray. Avoid this problem by raising the flats off the ground. Both the polystyrene and Todd planter flats must be watered with care. Todd planter flats have a pyramidal design that forces roots downward to an open bottom where the roots are air pruned. Some polystyrene containers have open bottoms — tube types have open bottoms, groove types have small drainage holes.

In general, peat type containers are the most expensive, followed by the Todd planter type, then the polystyrene type.

The number of plants in a tray depends on the cell size for each plant. Vegetables are commonly grown in trays with 30 to 300 cells. In general, larger cells lead to greater early yield in fruiting crops. Larger cells are also easier to manage because the greater soil volume holds more water and nutrients. Due to the expense of building and maintaining greenhouse space, many growers have moved to smaller cell volumes so more transplants can be grown in the limited space available. Some growers use two different cell sizes: a larger size for crops they expect to harvest earlier, and a smaller size for crops they expect to harvest later.

Seeding and Growing

Most vegetable transplants are sown one seed per cell. As a general rule, plant vegetable seeds at a depth two times their diameter. Vegetable seeds temperature requirements vary; most vegetable seeds germinate in the 70°F to 90°F range. The time from seeding to transplanting varies from three to four weeks (e.g., muskmelon) to 10 to 12 weeks (e.g., celery).

Vegetable seed may be ordered with special features, including seed priming and pelletizing. Primed seeds have been partially hydrated, then dried down, resulting in earlier germination and better uniformity. Priming may be useful for hard-to-germinate seed such as triploid watermelon. Seed may be pelletized to make it easier to handle. In this process, varieties with small seeds, or irregular seeds (such as lettuce) are coated to make the seed larger and uniform in size and shape. This process makes mechanized planting easier.

The growing mix should be well-drained and free of disease-causing organisms (pathogens). Most commercial mixes fit this description and perform well. These mixes are often referred to as “soilless mixes” since they are composed primarily of peat or coconut coir, perlite or vermiculite, and sometimes bark or ash. These mixes usually come in bales or bags and have been pasteurized (sufficiently heated to kill soil microorganisms capable of causing disease problems). It is advisable to test the mix before using it to make sure the pH is within an acceptable range (between 5.5 and 6.5) and to determine the initial nutrient content of the mix.

Most mixes include a small amount of fertilizer, but transplants usually benefit from additional regular nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) fertilization once true leaves appear. Depending on the initial nutrient level in the mix, including calcium (Ca) and magnesium (Mg) in the fertilizer solution may also be advised. Soluble synthetic fertilizers (21-5-20, 20-10-20) and liquid organic fertilizers (fish emulsion) are commonly used. The best rate, frequency, and method of fertilization will depend on your potting mix and watering practices. Common alternatives include a 50 to 200 ppm N solution applied at every watering, or a 300 to 500 ppm N solution applied weekly.

To make a 100 ppm N solution, use 0.42 pounds (6.6 ounces) of a 20 percent nitrogen fertilizer for every 100 gallons of water. Over-application of ammoniacal N can be detrimental to transplants. This problem can be minimized by not over-applying N, and by using fertilizer in which most N is in the nitrate form. Check the bag label.

Transplants that are too tall and tend to fall over are often referred to as “spindly,” “shanky,” or “leggy.” Such transplants may have low survival rates in the field. Spindly transplants are produced under low light conditions, high fertilizer rates, and/or over watering. Cloudy weather or greenhouse structures that don’t let in adequate light could be the culprits. Artificial lights could be helpful during inclement weather, but may be cost prohibitive. Under such conditions, use a fertilizer containing a lower percentage of P. For instance, try 21-5-20 rather than 20-20-20. It is important to provide adequate P, but not too much. Under fertilization with P will produce short plants, but yields also will suffer. Hot days and cold nights favor leggy transplants. If night temperatures are equal to or higher than day temperatures, stem elongation will be reduced. It may be sufficient to lower the temperatures for a two-hour period starting at dawn.

To prepare transplants for the harsher environment of the field, it is necessary to harden them off. Transplants may be hardened off by withholding water and lowering temperatures moderately during the last week or so of growth. Some growers place transplants in wagons and wheel the transplants outside on appropriate days to get the plants used to field conditions. The transplants are wheeled back inside at night and during especially harsh weather.

After transplanting, plants should be irrigated as soon as possible. Some transplanters are equipped to irrigate plants at the time of transplanting. Otherwise, arrange to irrigate soon. Applying a small amount of starter fertilizer in the transplant water is often beneficial. See Fertilizer Recommendations on page 7, for starter fertilizer recommendations. If transplants are held in the greenhouse to replace those that don’t survive, remember to avoid using transplants that have begun to vine or flower.

Diseases

Diseases that are likely to affect vegetable transplant production in the Midwest fall into two types: damping off diseases (caused by soilborne fungi) and transplant diseases (usually associated with fungi or bacteria which survive with seed or plant residue). Both disease types can cause extensive transplant loss.

Damping off may occur before or after seedlings emerge from the soil. Preemergence damping off occurs when fungi infect seeds as they germinate. As infections progress, seeds rot and eventually disintegrate. Poor stands become apparent after several days or weeks.

Postemergence damping off is usually observed in seed flats or among transplants. Fungi infect stems at or near the soil surface. The affected area of the stem takes on a water-soaked appearance and sometimes becomes constricted. Eventually, the stems are unable to maintain the structural support of seedlings, which usually collapse and die within 24 to 48 hours.

Several soilborne fungi cause damping off on vegetables. *Fusarium, Phytophthora, Pythium,* and *Rhizoctonia* species are well known causal agents of pre- and postemergence damping off. Control measures to prevent damping off diseases Include:

- Using uncontaminated soil mix. Use a commercially prepared soilless growing mix sold in 3 to 4 cubic foot bales or bags. A common mistake is to open a bag of "clean" soil mix and place it on a dirty floor or some other unclean surface prior to planting. Remember that your soil is only as clean as the dirtiest surface it has contacted.
- Planting seeds shallow and in warm soil.
- Using soil mixes that drain well.

Seedborne and residueborne diseases affect most vegetable crops. The pathogens (disease-causing microorganisms) survive in or on seeds or plant residues, not in soil mixes. Outbreaks of these diseases often show up as clusters of diseased plants, and symptoms often include brown lesions with yellow halos on leaves. By contrast, environmentally induced problems often occur uniformly throughout the seedlings or only in one location (for example, close to an outside wall).

Several different fungal or bacterial pathogens may be introduced into a transplant facility via contaminated seed or transplants (Table 2). Once introduced, these pathogens may continue to cause problems year after year if proper precautions are not taken.

Table 2. Vegetable crops frequently grown as transplants and the diseases that are most often observed on the seedlings.

Vegetable Crop	Disease
cabbage	black rot
	Alternaria leaf spot
cucumber	angular leaf spot
muskmelon	anthracnose
	gummy stem blight
pepper	bacterial spot
tomato	bacterial canker
	bacterial speck
	bacterial spot
watermelon	anthracnose
	gummy stem blight
	bacterial fruit blotch

The pathogens that cause these diseases may be seedborne.

Several measures should be taken to minimize or prevent introducing seedborne or residueborne pathogens into a transplant facility:

- Avoid saving seed unless you are specifically trained and equipped for seed production.
- Inspect seedlings frequently while they are growing.
- Separate seedlots from one another. Save all information regarding seed purchases.
- Irrigate in the morning to ensure soil and leaf surfaces dry.
- Check fungicide and bactericide labels for specific mentions of greenhouse use when treating transplants (see Table 3 for liquid pesticide conversion table).
- Practice good sanitation. Plant pathogens often survive in soil and plant residues. Therefore, sanitation is as important for a greenhouse as it is for a kitchen. Greenhouse floors should be as free of soil and residue as possible; plastic or cloth floor coverings provide a barrier between dirt floors and transplants. Transplant trays and flats should be new or cleaned and disinfected before each transplant generation.

More detailed information on disease prevention and control in the greenhouse is available in the Purdue Extension publication *Preventing Seedling Diseases in the Greenhouse,* www.ces.purdue.edu/extmedia/BP/BP-61/BP-61.html.

Table 3. Conversion table for use of liquid pesticides on small areas.

Rate per acre	Rate per 1,000 square feet	Rate per 100 square feet
1 pint	0.75 tablespoon	0.25 teaspoon
1 quart	1.5 tablespoons	0.5 teaspoon
2 quarts	3 tablespoons	1 teaspoons
1 gallon	6 tablespoons	2 teaspoons
25 gallons	4.5 pints	1 cup
50 gallons	4.5 quarts	1 pint
75 gallons	7 quarts	1.5 pints
100 gallons	9 quarts	1 quart

Remember to check the fungicide label for the particular crop, pest, and site of your planned use.