

Soil Block Success!!!



Flickr via [Kevin Doncaster](#)

Whenever I experiment with something new during the seed starting season, I feel incredibly anxious. What if it goes wrong? What if I end up with unhealthy starts? Believe me. I've made my fair share of mistakes that have resulted in disaster.

I tried using jiffy pellets one year, and my seedlings were stunted. Another year, I tried plastic pots. It was a slightly pricier endeavor than the peat pellets, but I hoped that it would result in more vigorous seedlings. It ended up being a frustrating experience. The pots were flimsy, and many of my seedlings became root-bound.

Another year, everything was going great, but the humidity levels in my basement grow space were less than ideal. I ended

up trashing most of my seedlings because of damping off.

I've done things to kill seedlings, and I've had things happen that were totally outside of my control. Needless to say, I was really nervous about trying something new, but I was excited to see if it would make this part of the gardening process a bit easier and a bit kinder on my wallet.

Creating Soil Block

Last weekend, after a particularly long day and a week that felt like it was never going to end, I finally decided to start some seedlings—early March is the time to start tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants if you're in Zone 5.

I was exhausted but determined to get going. Nightshades are notoriously slow to germinate, so I didn't want to wait any longer.

I dumped some soil mix into a bucket (I bought a specialty sterile mix this year because honestly, a few extra bucks seemed worth it to avoid the massacre of seedlings I dealt with last spring) and added water until I got a goopy consistency.

What I Learned

In retrospect, I don't think I added enough water. Lesson learned. For the next batch of seedlings, I'll aim for a slurry and not a goop.

Soil blocking was less messy than I envisioned, but you definitely get your hands dirty! I rolled up my sleeves and pushed the metal blocking tool into the soil goop until there was water seeping out a bit.

Then, I popped the perfectly formed blocks onto my tray.

I was amazed at how well-formed the blocks were and still are.

A few are crumbling slightly, but all in all, they're doing fine.

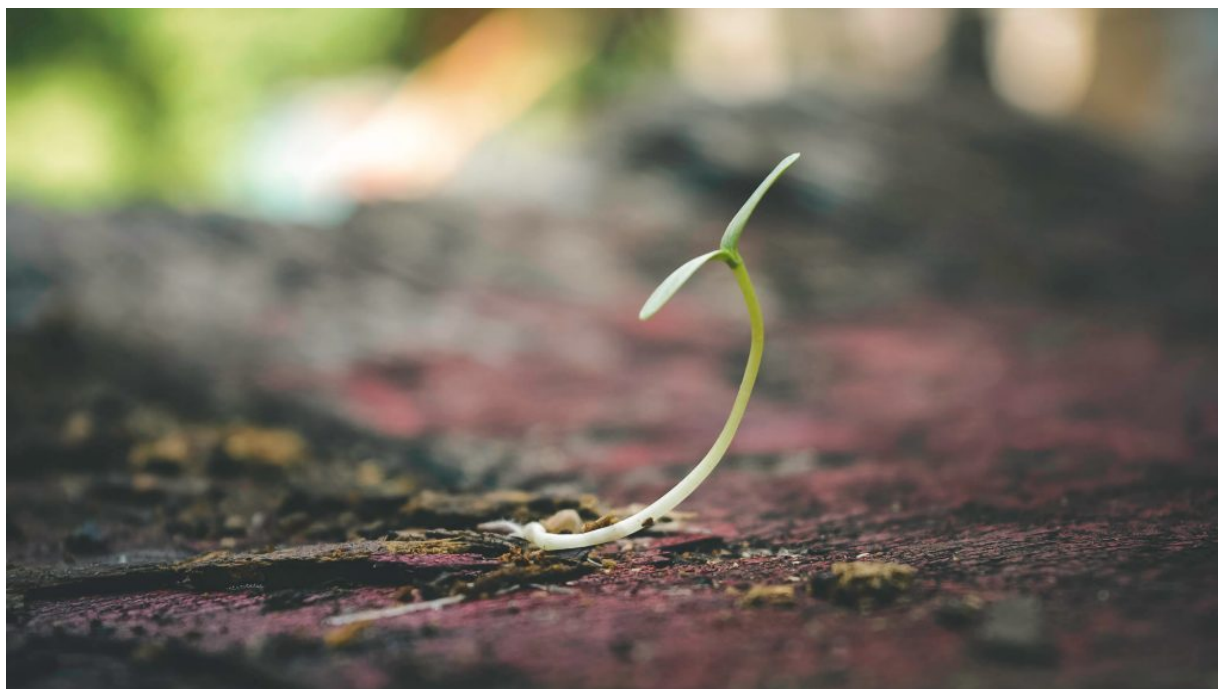
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I definitely have to work on my technique—the mix should have more water and I need to compress the blocks a bit more, too—but I feel confident that this is a method I'll be using from now on. I'm so grateful not to have to deal with pots ever again. What a relief!

Looking Forward

I've been misting the blocks and watering from underneath (something I usually do with all my plants) and I'm eager to see how things go when it's time to transplant the seedlings. Though perhaps that's thinking too far ahead. Maybe I'll just wait and see if anything actually sprouts!

I'm New to Gardening: Is Starting From Seed Worth It?



'Tis the season to start fielding questions from curious friends interested in starting a garden. One of my friends recently moved into a new home and is keen to grow a few incredible edibles in her available outdoor space. She's unsure of whether to bother with seed starting and wondered if she'd be better off simply buying plants at a local nursery.

What should she do? Here's a breakdown of the two options.

Benefits of Seed Starting

Seed starting is a great way to get started with gardening. Here's why:

- **There's so much choice.** When you're starting from seed, you have a whole slew of plants available to you. You're not stuck with the single variety available at the local nursery.
- **You have control over plant growth.** You decide the products used to grow your plants. Do you want to use organic methods? Go right ahead! When buying from a nursery, you may not have all the information about a plant's history. You also need to pay close attention to any hitchhikers when purchasing plants from someone

else. Are there pests hidden in the foliage? Are there any signs of disease?

- **It's a rewarding process.** There's nothing that compares to the feeling of watching a plant go from seed to harvest. It's a seriously fulfilling adventure.

Of course, seed starting also has plenty of drawbacks. It requires time and effort. You'll need to watch your plants for signs of distress and work to ensure they have everything they need (light, water, nutrients, and room to grow).

While seed starting setup costs vary significantly, there's some initial investment required. Though, it's easy to start [seeds on a budget](#).

The risk of failure is probably the biggest potential drawback, but I'm of the opinion that [failure](#) is the best way to learn!

Benefits of purchasing from a nursery

I think buying from a nursery has its pros, especially if you're just starting and plan to work in a small space. Buying a handful of plants isn't much more expensive than starting a shelving unit full of seeds.

- **Plant availability.** While you have a lot more variety at your fingertips when starting from seed, you'll find hard-to-grow plants at your nursery. Things like asparagus, fruit bushes, and fruit trees are tough to grow from seed but are readily available at local nurseries.
- **Simplicity.** If you're a busy person, the time required to take care of seedlings is something to consider. Buying from a nursery is easy and requires minimal effort.
- **Questions answered.** At specialized nurseries, the staff

is available to answer all of your questions, which is super useful if you're totally new to gardening.

Of course, there's no reason you can't do both! Last year, contaminated soil mix caused most of my seedlings to die, and I was left with only a handful of viable starts. I ended up buying a bunch of plants at my local nursery to make up for my devastating loss.

Can you think of any other benefits to either option that I forgot to mention? Let me know! Leave a comment with your thoughts.

A New Seed Starting Adventure With Soil Blocks



I'm rushing to set up my grow shelves and get going with seed starting this year. I came down with another illness over a week ago and it hit me hard. The second time this winter! And it was a nasty bug that left me unable to move from the couch. I spent my time laid up thinking about how I was running behind with all my seed starting activities. As soon as I felt better, I began an inventory of my seeds and ordered seed starting mix.

I also decided to invest in a whole new seed starting tool this year: **a soil blocker**.

I'm tired of buying crappy pots and DIY vessels to start seeds. Even when I locate a good deal, it always seems insane to spend money on containers that are difficult to sanitize and keep looking like new. I abhor having to re-pot tiny seedlings into bigger pots, too. In my quest to simplify the process, I decided to experiment with something new – soil blocks.

What are soil blocks?

Instead of filling pots and containers with soil mix, soil blocking involves a metal press-like tool that compresses wet dirt into manageable, uniform clods. Plant seed directly into the cube and never have to deal with pots again!

Soil blockers are available in multiple sizes, and it's possible to pot a smaller soil cube onto a larger one. A significant advantage of this seed-starting method, though, is that plants are much more unlikely to become root-bound than their potted counterparts.

A breakdown of soil block advantages

Soil blocking certainly involves some up-front costs. I spent about \$40 for a metal blocker that will create blocks of 2-

inches by 2-inches. I intend to purchase another block to make 4-inch by 4-inch blocks, as well. You'll also need trays to house your finished soil block seedlings—this is something I already have. If you need a quick, cheap solution, head to the Dollar Store and grab some inexpensive baking sheet packs to house your blocks. Once you've purchased these supplies, however, the only renewable costs involved are seed and soil mix. Here's why I've decided to switch to this method:

- **No more pots.** They're costly and aren't always reusable. Quality varies significantly, and for those with limited storage space, they take up a whole lot of room. No more time is wasted sanitizing pots each winter in preparation for seed starting.
- **Quick and efficient.** Making blocks is easy and a lot less time consuming than filling small awkward-shaped pots.
- **No-fuss transplanting.** Potting up is a pain in the butt with containers but with soil blocks, it's incredibly straightforward. Moving plants into the garden is similarly easy. Plants are a lot hardier and since they're never removed from their containers, they experience far less transplant shock than potted seedlings.
- **Space-saving.** In previous years, the cheapest pots I could find were round in shape, and it was difficult to make efficient use of my shelving space. Soil blocks don't take up as much [space](#).
- **Healthy, strong starts.** Plants never become root-bound and roots are much healthier than with plants left in pots. Far less handling and moving around during the seed starting process produces robust seedlings.

I'm looking forward to sharing my progress with soil blocks this season! Here's hoping it goes smoothly.