

DAMPING OFF by Carol Ann Harlos

Have you ever planted seeds, seen them germinate into healthy plants only to find them dead a short time later? This sudden death is called “damping off”. It is caused by several fungi including *Pythium*, *Phytophthora*, *Sclerotinia*, and *Botrytis*.

“Damping off” affects the conducting tissue of stems not only above the soil surface but below. You may notice that the stems look rather pinched off near the soil. Actually they have collapsed. There is no cure once this occurs.

How do you prevent this from happening? Most plant problems are cultural. (That means it was your fault!) Before trays or other containers are used (especially if you used them previously) they should be scrubbed clean with detergent water and then rinsed with dilute bleach solution and thoroughly dried. Commercial seed starting mixes, vermiculite, or perlite or other sterile product can be used as the starting medium. Water from the bottom. Plant your seeds at the appropriate depth and some distance apart. Otherwise the baby plant has to struggle to get to the surface and to light often weakening it and predisposing it to damp off diseases. Keep the seeds warm so they germinate faster using either heater cables or heating mats. Keep the medium moist but not sopping wet. Some people put a thin layer of sand on the surface to keep it dry. Be sure to let the medium dry out a bit before watering the seedlings. Good air circulation combined with adequate light also make healthy seedlings a more likely possibility.

Growing plants from seed is an exciting way to get new plants at a fraction of the cost of the purchase of individual plants. It is imperative then that you do what is best for your seedlings!



COMPOST MAGIC by Mary Ann Bald

A compost pile needs certain elements in the proper proportions for it to function. Carbon and nitrogen should be in a ratio of 25:1 or 30:1. High carbon ingredients include sawdust, paper, pine needles, leaves and straw. High nitrogen ingredients include grass clippings, fruit and veggie scraps and manure. Note that you should NOT put meat scraps or fats in your compost, nor should you include pet poop. Put the carbon vs nitrogen items in alternating layers.

Compost needs to stay moist, but not soggy and requires plenty of air. Make sure your compost bin or pile or heap has good drainage and dampen each layer as it's added. To allow air at the base you could start with a layer of branches. Turning the compost will help keep it aerated. Some store bought compost bins are built for rotation (look rather like the big capsule at the back of a cement truck).

The compost will generate some heat to sustain its biological processes. A good size for this little ecology is about 3 ft. x 3 ft. and up to 5 ft. high. If you make it taller, it may be likely that the weight will push the air out of the heap.



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