Seedling Care

**Watering**

- Newly sown flats should have surface dry down of about 50% before watering again.
  - Exception: larger seeds such as cucurbits and sunflowers are susceptible to rot and should be allowed to have 100% surface dry down before watering again.
- Germinated flats: begin to water more deeply and less frequently. You can check the moisture level by gently pulling out a plug to see the water line on the soil, or by lifting a flat to feel the weight.
- Always use a watering can with a fine sprinkle OR water flats on trays from underneath. This prevents water from pushing small seeds out of place.

Check seedlings after watering – are the edges watered? Are plugs damp all the way through?

Keep schedules in mind – make sure seedlings are well watered before a day off or weekend that the garden is closed.

**Thinning and Hardening off**

When seedlings have two sets of true leaves (not counting the cotyledon or seed leaves) you can start thinning them out and hardening them off to prepare them for life outside.
To thin out multiple seedlings that are in one plug, you can either separate them by hand and plant each one OR cut down all but the healthiest looking one in each plug.

If seedlings are not going directly into the ground, you can ‘step up’ into larger pots at this time. If you are stepping up or separating seedlings, be sure to allow another few weeks before transplanting again. This helps reduce stress on the seedling.

Seedlings to be planted out then need to be ‘hardened off’ or acclimated to the world outside of the greenhouse. We want to harden off for about 7-10 days, so we should begin this step 7-10 days before we plan to plant out in the garden.

1. Move seedlings out to a shaded or partly shaded space in the garden. Do not put seedlings out if it is very windy or rainy.
2. After a few hours, bring seedlings back into the greenhouse.
3. After a few days, bring seedlings out to a sunny area of the garden in the early morning. Make sure to keep them well watered during this time.
4. Gradually leave seedlings out for longer periods of time over the next 5 days. At this stage a light wind or rain is okay – but make sure the bottom tray has drainage so the seedlings don’t drown.
5. Finally, leave seedlings out overnight, if there is no strong wind or rain in the forecast. In early spring also be careful not to leave seedlings out in a frost!

**Preparing for transplant**

Trays should be watered on the morning of the transplant to ensure plugs can be removed easily from the tray. Most plants like to have their roots “tickled” or separated gently to encourage branching out – especially if they are root bound (roots spiraling around themselves in the plug).

Exceptions: Cucurbits (cucumbers, squash, melons), corn, rice. These plants do not like to be transplanted, so we want to avoid disturbing them in the process as much as possible.

Proper plant spacing is usually found on the back of the seed packet, but depending on where we are planting, we may alter the spacing to fit our needs. Planting too closely together can decrease airflow between plants and therefore make plants more susceptible to diseases and pest issues. It may also stunt growth, as is the case with seedlings that are not thinned.