

Greens on the Windowsill

MARIANNE PETERS

I love homegrown vegetables. If I haven't eaten something fresh and green for a day or two, I really miss it—amazing for someone who grew up on frozen peas, canned corn, and that perennial favorite, green bean casserole. As I glance outside my window, though, the weather's frigid. The garden's asleep. The soil, if I care to dig, is hard as bedrock—a challenge for even the most determined gardener and committed locavore.

Instead of doing without my veggies, I'm growing some greens indoors this winter: not full-grown heads of lettuce, mind you, but the tender stems and early leaves—otherwise known as sprouts. Even if you are a novice gardener, this project could not be easier. It requires a shallow container and a little dirt, water, and light. The sight of green shoots popping up like tiny flags through the soil is the promise of spring in the dead of winter, and you can't get much more local than your windowsill. When spring finally does arrive, it's an easy step to move the sprouts from the window to a container on the porch, patio, or balcony and grow a pot of full-sized greens. Voilà—you're growing your own salads.

Sprouting also introduces your kids to the humble miracle of sprouting seeds. In the era of fast food, it's critical to teach children about food sources and empower them to “grow their own.” And it's fun!

When I'm ready to get started, I dig out a container such as an aluminum pie plate or drip pan. Any shallow pan works well, as long as there are several small holes for drainage. In the past I've purchased boxed ready-made salads, then recycled the clear plastic container for sprouts. For a planting medium, I put about two inches of an organic potting soil or soilless mix in the pan. I won't need a lot, because the plants won't be rooting very deeply before I harvest them.

Now, what to plant? I keep a collection of seeds left over from the spring and summer. While theoretically I could sprout anything, lettuces sprout reliably and quickly. For spicier sprouts, I also sprout radishes, arugula, or cress. If I want something special, though, usually this time of year I have to order it from a seed supplier. One of my favorite organic suppliers is Renee's Garden (www.reneesgarden.com). I try to use heirloom seeds, very old varieties of plants that have not been genetically modified or exposed to pesticides and herbicides. The seed industry is becoming more and more homogenized, and in the grocery aisles we find produce that's been bred to ship thousands of miles, picked green, and artificially ripened, lacking color, delicacy, and taste. When I buy heirloom seeds, I support independent seed suppliers' efforts to retain the amazing variety of edible plants that are quickly disappearing from our

supermarkets.

When I'm ready to plant, I sprinkle several pinches of seeds over the surface of the soil and then cover them lightly with approximately 1/8 inch of the mix. I gently water the seeds to get them started. After wetting the soil initially, I use a spray bottle to keep the medium moist until the seeds germinate, covering my containers loosely with plastic until I see growth. They only take a few days or so to pop through the soil.

My sunny kitchen windowsill is just perfect for sprouting. Once the leaves have unfurled, the plants are ready to harvest—you can let them grow as big as you want at this point. I use scissors to snip off the stems and store them in the refrigerator till I need them. To keep myself in sprouts all winter, I keep several small containers planted, so when one crop is harvested, there's always another one ready to germinate. I sprinkle my sprouts on salads, layer them on sandwiches, and toss them in stir-fries.

Want more information on growing sprouts? Check out www.thedailygardener.com, a website with instructions for sprouting, recipes, and seeds you can order. To learn more about heirloom plants and their importance in our food supply, I rely on Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, found at rareseeds.com. ■

Marianne Peters is a freelance writer living in Plymouth, Indiana.