

Hardening off

Preparing your transplants for planting

What's "hardening off?"

"Hardening off" is the process of moving plants outdoors for a portion of the day to gradually introduce them to the direct sunlight, dry air and cold nights. Seedlings become accustomed to outdoor conditions over a 7 - 10 day period.

How to

1. On a mild day, start with **2 - 3 hours of sun** in a sheltered location.
2. Increase exposure to sunlight a few additional hours at a time and gradually reduce frequency of watering, but **do not allow seedlings to wilt**. Avoid fertilizing.
3. Keep an eye on the weather and listen to the low temperature prediction. **If temperatures below the crop's minimum are forecast**, bring the plants indoors or close the cold frame and cover it with a blanket or other insulation.
4. **Know the relative hardiness of various crops.** Onions and brassicas are hardy and can take temperatures in the 40s. After they are well hardened off, light frosts won't hurt them. Warm-season crops such as eggplants, melons and cucumbers prefer warm nights, at least 60°F. They can't stand below-freezing temperatures, even after hardening off. Hardy plants can be hardened off when the outside temperature is consistently above 40°F. Half-hardy plants may be hardened off at 45°F.

On the day of transplanting:



1. Avoid transplanting during very sunny, hot and/or windy weather in the middle of the day. Choose a cloudy, calm day or plant in the evening or early morning.



4. Break up roots if they are tightly packed and wrapped around each other. If plants are in the cucurbit family, like melons and cucumbers, do not tamper with their tender roots.



2. Water transplants in their pots.



5. Set plants a half inch deeper in the soil than they were growing in the container.



3. Gently remove transplants from the container.



6. Gently tamp down the soil to tuck in the plant and water with a diluted fast release liquid fertilizer like fish emulsion. This boost of fertilizer helps plants overcome the shock of being transplanted.