

Spring came last week, roaring in like a lion, then came another dose of winter's cold, but for gardeners it's time to get your hands dirty and have fun. Now is the time to start your vegetable seeds. To start seeds properly arm yourself with seed trays—you can usually find them for a dollar or two at Jamestown Hardware. You'll also need good quality potting soil, plastic wrap (I steal mine from the kitchen), a little water and of course, your seeds.

At this time of year, start eggplant, tomato, pepper, leek, onion, and herb seeds. By starting your own seeds, you can get a much larger variety of plants than can be found at your local garden store. For example, I start up to 20 different types of tomatoes. I may only plant one or two of each type, but being able to pick green, yellow, white, pink or red tomatoes adds a lot of color to a salad. Similarly, I may start six or eight types of eggplants or peppers, which gives a lot of variety on the dinner table in summer.

You can start your seedlings on a sunny window sill, but you'll still have to protect them from the cold at night. I use a germination chamber in my basement with fluorescent shop lights positioned over the top of seed trays. In the greenhouse, I use a propagation mat that keeps temperatures around 70 degrees. However, I find that the mat tends to dry out the pots fairly quickly, so watering often is a must.

First, wet your potting soil. It should be moist, not dripping wet. Squeeze a handful in your fist, if it drips, it's too wet. When you have the soil moist enough, ladle it into your planting trays. I sometimes use inserts in the tray for individual plants to make it easier to plant them out, but I



**The Island Garden**

By Roger Marshall

find that individual trays dry out very quickly and need watering almost daily. If you lay the soil in a planting tray, the seedlings will clump together, but if you plant them up after the first true leaves are showing, the roots won't tangle too much. By transplanting into four-inch pots, tomatoes and other seedlings can grow fairly large before they need to be planted out. If you don't have proper seedling pots, use paper coffee cups. You can buy a pile of them for just a few dollars. I prefer to use square pots, simply because they can be placed under lights with no spaces (and no water leakage) between the pots.

With your pots loaded with soil, put a seed or two in each pot or sprinkle your seeds on the top of the seed flat. Label them and cover the seeds with a tiny amount of soil. About twice the seed diameter is a good thickness of soil to use. I use dry soil or vermiculite for this job and spray it with a small water sprayer afterwards. The idea is to put enough water on the soil surface to allow the seeds to swell with moisture, then the seed skin pops and the seedling starts to grow. Put plastic wrap over the seed tray and leave the tray for about a week. Depending on the seeds, you'll find that it takes a few days for them to start growing. Eggplants and peppers may take up to 10 days to start. Lettuce and other greens only take a day or two but they are fast growing and should

not be started for another month or so.

I put shop lights with one warm and one cold fluorescent tube in each fixture over the seed flats. My lights are one- to two-inches from the top of the soil until the seeds germinate. As the seedlings grow, the lights are raised so that they stay about an inch or two above the plants. If you put your fluorescent lights any higher your seedlings will get leggy.

You'll also need a little heat to encourage sprouting. I find that by stacking seed flats one above the other, the bottom fluorescent fixture heats the one above and I don't worry too much about heat. The largest plants are on the bottom layer and don't need quite as much heat, so they continue to grow. If you don't have such an arrangement, you need to keep your seedlings at about 70 degrees until they germinate, then you can lower the temperature to about 60. If you keep temperatures high, you'll find that the seedlings can get leggy.

If you've planted into seed trays, pot seedlings into larger pots as soon as they have two true leaves. Handle seedlings by the leaf, not by the stem which is easily crushed. If you plan on planting out by the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, now is the time to start your seedlings.

One last note, if you plan on planting potatoes, you can start "chitting" seedlings indoors now or can plant the potatoes into the ground as soon as the soil temperatures get a little warmer in a week or so. I find that getting seed potatoes into the ground and covering them with a glass cloche, gives them an early start and results in some very early potatoes.



**A sign of spring**

The male osprey returned to the nest at Marsh Meadows last Saturday. The female usually follows a few days later. Last year the male arrived on March 25 followed by the female on March 28. For more information and real time video of the nest, visit the Conanicut Island Raptor Project's Web site at [www.conanicutraptors.com](http://www.conanicutraptors.com) and click on Creek Nest webcam.

Photo by Chris Powell



**WEEKLY SPECIALS**

**Sunday – All Day – \$1.50 Draft Beer  
Burger and a Beer - ONLY \$10**

**Monday Night – \$1.50 Draft Beer**

**Tuesday Night – 1/2 Price Bar Appetizers**

**Wednesday Night – Prime Rib - ONLY \$14**

**Thursday Night – Dinner for Two with a featured Wine - \$50**

Thursday to Sunday – Lunch 12 - 3 p.m.

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**Arts council offers spring classes**

Take Arts Break classes, sponsored by the North Kingstown Arts Council, beginning April 8.

All Classes are held in North Kingstown and are available to both residents and non-residents. Multi-session classes include Calligraphy: The Foundational Hand; Pen & Ink Drawing; Art Journaling; Creative Watercolor; and Magazine Writing. One-day classes include Fiction Writing; Making Art with Mixed Media; Painting Small Abstracts; Stained Glass Workshops; and Using Water Soluble Watercolor Pencils. Further information may be found at [www.NKArtsCouncil.org](http://www.NKArtsCouncil.org) or 294-3331, ext. 241.

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