

Hardening off transplants

It is probably a very safe guess that many of us gardeners are ready and eager to begin transplanting our seedlings from indoors, under lights, into their new home outside in the garden. For plants that started from seed, this is the time to “harden them off” before placing them in the soil of the raised beds. Hardening off is not a difficult process by any means, but it can be the difference between plant success and failure.

Here in the desert southwest it may not appear to be quite so critical for plants, since they will rarely need to confront chilly temperatures once they go into the ground. Although they will not be experiencing spring frost, evenings and overnight conditions in late March can be too cool for some tender plants. Just as important, however, is acclimating plants to the brighter light conditions outside.

There are many web pages with information on hardening off, but the process is fundamentally simple.

Plants that have spent most or all of their lives indoors in pampered conditions need to become accustomed to the world outdoors. Hardening gently allows this to happen.

The desert light can sunburn leaves and stems, while the fierce wind can shred tender leaves and dry out the soil around transplants. To protect young plants at first, find a sheltered place outdoors where the plants will be safe from the brightest sun and wind. Place the new plants in this sheltered spot for a couple of hours per day, increasing the length of time outdoors every day, but remember to bring them in at night. After a few days, they can go into a brighter spot for more hours. In a week to 10 days, they will be ready for planting in the raised bed or other garden spot.

While the process is going on, do not forget to keep the plants moist. Small transplants will desiccate quickly if ignored. On the other hand, slightly lowering the amount of water they receive will toughen them, preparing them for outdoor conditions.

Timing is critical when dealing with certain transplants. Tomatoes, for instance, have a relatively brief period for fruit production, which is why we do not plant their seeds outdoors. They are also fussy about growing conditions. These plants will grow as long as nighttime temperatures are above 50°F and they will produce fruit until the mercury exceeds 90°F. Given this short window, the only way to get a reasonable tomato crop is by using transplants, hardening them off and getting them into the ground around the end of March.

Along with the excitement of getting a garden fruitful again, there is the usual concern about what to apply or not apply to our outdoor growing plants. Fertilizer supplements the



nutrients plants absorb from the soil, and while they are growing indoors, it is often a good idea to give them small amounts of dilute fertilizer. When hardening them off, however, limit or stop fertilizing; otherwise, they may remain too tender for survival in the stressful world outside.

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