

SEEDLINGS-BY-SHOPLIGHT

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Gardeners who try starting vegetable seedlings in a sunny window usually complain about the pale green or purplish leaves on spindly stems of plants that lean toward the window. When these weak plants are transplanted to the garden, they are shocked and often killed by the cold, wind and intense sunlight. These gardeners would have been wiser to buy their plants from a good garden center or greenhouse grower. But, what if the varieties you want are not sold by the plant grower in your town? There's an easy answer. Grow your own seedlings indoors, but with a shoplight almost anywhere inside your home. Last spring I started several dozen vegetable seedlings on the bedroom floor with two shoplights.

You can grow healthy, short stemmed vegetable plants with dark green leaves using the light from an ordinary fluorescent shoplight as the only light source for those plants. The shoplight I'm talking about is the kind with two 40-watt cool white fluorescent tubes housed in a white fixture suspended with chains from an overhead support. These fixtures are usually four feet long. The fixture can be suspended over a table by chains from hooks in the ceiling. A saw horse or step ladder will support the fixture for the few weeks required to start seedlings in containers on the floor. Be sure to lay down a sheet of plastic to protect the flooring from excess water that drains from the plant containers.

These inexpensive light units, usually costing from \$12 to \$15 will give plenty of light to the small plants only if the fluorescent tube is kept close, very close, and that is the secret. The tube surface must not be more than one to two inches above the leaf surface.

Raise the light fixture often enough to maintain the leaf-to-tube distance in a range of one or two inches. To start with, hang the light fixture so that the tube surface is only an inch above the surface of the germinating medium or soil mix. The moderate heat given off by the fluorescent tube will warm the mix and the seed, thereby hastening germination. A thin film of plastic laid over the surface of the seed flat will prevent drying of the mix by the heat from the tube. Remove the plastic film the instant you see the plant shoot breaking through the surface.

Try to place the seedling container in an area where the temperature will not fall below 55 to 60 degrees F. at night and where the temperature will rise to 65 or 70 degrees during the day. Turn the light on when you arise in the morning and turn them off before going to sleep at night, to give a light period of at least 12 to 14 hours. Do not leave the lights on all the time.

If you already have a fluorescent light fixture and wish to use it for starting plants, replace the old bulbs with new ones to assure maximum light for your plants.

Most vegetable plants can be kept under the light until they are large enough to be transplanted to the garden. The same fixture can be used to start several successions of seedlings. The first crops to start would be those that can be acclimated to the subfreezing outdoor temperatures of early spring. Some are onions, lettuce, cabbage and broccoli. The second crop under the same lights can be tomato, pepper and okra seedlings which will be transplanted into your garden after the danger of frost. Finally, you can start seedlings of vine crops like cucumber, melon and squash in peat pots which can be planted directly to the garden in only two to three weeks from the day you sowed the seed.

Do me a favor, please tell our secret to a friend.