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## Growing Sprouts

Growing and harvesting vegetables doesn't have to be restricted to summer and the backyard garden. Growing and eating sprouts can be done at home any time of the year. The custom of sprouting beans is more than twice as old as the Wall of China. Widely practiced in far eastern countries, a Chinese emperor recorded the use of health-giving sprouts in 2439 BC. Today, with the exception of natural or health food advocates, the majority of Americans are either unfamiliar with sprouts or are exposed to them only through Chinese cuisine. This is a shame because the nutritional quality of the proteins found in legumes and grains is greatly improved during sprouting.

If you decide to start a sprout garden all that is needed is a wide-mouth quart jar, a piece of muslin or cheese cloth or an old nylon stocking, and a rubber band or a piece of string. Many types of seeds can be used. Mung beans, lentils, soy and alfalfa are easier to grow than other beans or grains. Seeds should be purchased from a grocery or specialty store. Seeds that come from seed companies are usually treated (unless specified differently) with insecticide/fungicide mixtures and should not be used for sprouting. Such seeds can be poisonous if consumed.

To keep seeds in viable condition, store them in moisture-proof metal, glass or plastic containers with a tight-fitting lid in a cool, dry, dark place. Most seeds will remain in viable condition for three to four months at room temperature or for longer periods if stored in the refrigerator.

There are many methods for sprouting seeds, but all you need is water and warmth for germination. Pick only the whole seeds. Cracked or broken seeds will not sprout, but ferment, causing decay of the remaining seeds.

Measure one-third cup seeds, rinse and soak in two cups tepid water for 8 to 10 hours or overnight in a quart jar. The next day drain the jar and retain the liquid for use as stock in soups or beverages. Rinse the soaked seeds thoroughly in tepid water, drain well, cover with a dampened cloth or nylon stocking and secure with a string or rubber band. Lay the mouth of the jar down at a slight angle (to drain excess water) in a bowl. The sprouting jar must be large enough for growth and air circulation. Keep the jar in a dark cabinet with an even temperature. Leave the door ajar for air circulation.

Continue to rinse the seeds twice a day. Be sure to drain excess water well each time. Mung, lentil and alfalfa sprouts are ready in three days, and soy in four days. When the sprouts have reached desired length, place the jar in direct light or artificial light for four to five hours for greening. Chlorophyll formed during the greening process improves eye appeal, flavor and nutritional value somewhat. Place the greened sprouts in cold water briefly to disentangle them for easier use. Drain well for one to two hours before storing.

The flavor of sprouts is at peak when they are used fresh. Refrigerate the sprouts in a covered container. Most sprouts will keep crispy as long as a week, but for maximum flavor and nutrition, sprout only what can be used in three to four days.

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