

## Are grow lights and propagators necessary?

At this time of year, you may be feeling the itch to get a head start with your seed sowing. Things like Aubergines, Peppers and Chillies that need a long growing season are usually the first on the list to be sown. However, the one thing that us food gardeners don't have currently, which our seedlings need, is lots of light. A south facing windowsill in January to us may seem nice and bright, but to a seedling it's almost like being in a cupboard. The light levels at this time are not enough for strong, healthy growth, which means you will end up with spindly, weak plants which may never catch up with later sown seedlings.

So how do we overcome this? You can buy special growing lights and, as some plants like heat as well, a heat mat or two is helpful for germinating seeds indoors. But if you don't have the space, the time or the money to spend on fancy heated propagators that's not a problem. It will just mean either waiting a couple of months before you sow or buy your seedlings ready grown at a garden centre.

When I first got the bug for growing all year round and becoming as self-sufficient in fruit and veg as possible, I got myself some basic growing lights and a small separate heat mat off the internet. Personally, I think a small heat mat is worth getting because as mentioned quite a few seeds like tomatoes and peppers need a bit of heat to germinate. A small mat will only use up about the same electricity as a small lamp.

Warming the temperature of your potting compost by using a heat mat will promote active microbiology and reduce the likelihood of moulds, damping off (when a seedling keels over and dies) and diseases that are common in starting seeds indoors. They also help your seeds sprout faster and help seedlings develop stronger roots as they grow.



But do you need lights? I found that the cheap lights that you get off the internet didn't really help much. You have to have them fairly close to your seedlings and the spread of light isn't that wide. Unlike the heat mat you don't have to have the lights on all the time, just about 12-14 hours a day, but it's still an extra cost to think about.

Seeds generally need heat to germinate, but not light, apart from Celery and some Lettuce varieties. It's only when the seedling gets its first leaves, or cotyledons, that you need good light.

If you're happy to wait until the end of March or April when the daylight begins to lengthen significantly to start sowing, then lights in my opinion are not necessary. If, however, you've really got the seed sowing bug and fancy getting yourself a heated propagator with lights, thermostats and timer, just keep in mind that you'll only be using it for a couple of months a year and will sit in storage for the other 10 months.