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## When it comes to gardening advice, be wary of what you read on social media

Linden Staciokas For the News-Miner Apr 16, 2016

FAIRBANKS — I don't belong to Facebook, largely because I have enough other time-sucks in my life, but recently a reader asked me about a gardening tip she had read on the Fairbanks Gardeners page. So I asked my husband, who does have a Facebook account, to join the group so I could look around. And here is what I found: tons of great encouragement and advice for new gardeners, seedlings for sale (some that looked deep green and stocky, while others looking so spindly and emaciated that they should have been headed for the compost bin and not for sale to unsuspecting and inexperienced gardeners), and a lot of erroneous information.

Actually, there were a few pieces of advice that guaranteed gardening failures of one type or another. I have no idea how much cross-over there is between people who read that site and those who read this paper, but I feel compelled to correct this misinformation, in the hope that a few new gardeners can be spared some misery.

**FB Advice:** If you have mold on top of the soil around your seedlings, you can eradicate it by using vinegar. **Fact:** Vinegar is used to kill weeds, meaning that seedlings doused or sprayed with vinegar will not flourish, assuming they survive at all. If you have mold, gently scrape off what you see. Improve the air circulation by not crowding the seedlings together. If you have a fan, set it on gentle and aim it toward the stricken seedlings for a few hours each day. Don't overwater.

**FB Advice:** Use eggshells for seed starting. **Fact:** Even if you plan to transplant to larger containers, the seedlings should stay in their birth homes until at least the first sets of true leaves appear. This requires more soil than can be crammed into an egg shell. Don't believe me? Then let me quote from a recent article by Anchorage gardening guru Jeff Lowenfels, who has written books about gardening soil. " ... make sure your containers are deep enough so that roots can develop unimpeded while the first few sets of leaves appear. Three to four inches is a minimum for starting containers. This is the depth of recycled coffee cups, yogurt containers and the like. Yes, I used to suggest starting tomatoes in egg cartons or even half-egg shells. This is a nice novelty, but I now realize these really don't provide enough soil for the roots."

**FB Advice:** Start your corn in mid-March. **Fact:** If you do that, you will be trying to transplant six-foot stalks that will making every attempt to keel over. If you do manage to get them into the ground without breaking them, the trauma of such a late transplant will seriously set them back. Coincidentally, the day after I read this tip, I received an email from a guy who was frustrated because, "In years past I've started it indoors under a grow light in late March. Usually by early May the corn is 6-feet tall and falling over." What I told him was that if you want to start your corn indoors, do so 10 days or two weeks before you plan to set it out into your plot. Alternatively, you can direct seed corn in mid to late May. With either method, you will increase your chances of success if you tent the area in plastic for a few weeks. I use wooden stakes or rebar to make a tent that is a foot or two or three over the seeds or seedlings, taking it off when the stalks are hitting the plastic. (If you do this, open the plastic during the day so the plants don't overheat.)

**FB Advice:** You can over-winter dahlias in the ground, which gives them the opportunity to "establish themselves." **Fact:** I have grown dahlias since 1970, and I am here to tell you that they are delicate and the tubers will die if left in the ground over the winter. However, the FB advice giver was so insistent, claiming that she did not dig up her dahlias and they came back and flourished year after year, that I thought perhaps I was behind the times and some sort of super dahlia had been developed. So, I called two of our wonderful local nurseries, Plant Kingdom and Hawk's, to see if they knew of any dahlias that would return if left in the ground all winter. The women I spoke to both assured me that nothing had changed and dahlias need to be dug up every fall, with the tubers that developed over the summer replanted in the spring.

Don't believe the three of us? Then listen to landscape expert David Beaulieu: "Dahlias are sub-tropical flowers, indigenous to the New World ... Hardy only as far north as planting zone 9 (or, at best, 8), the tubers must be dug up and stored for winter in cold climates ... " (The advice to leave dahlias in the ground over the winter was later removed from the FB page.)

**FB Advice:** You do not need lights; your seedlings can be started in a window. You just have to keep rotating them. **Fact:** Even with south facing windows, you are not going to get light sufficient for optimum seedling development. The key word is optimum, because you will get seedlings, they just will not be as strong and stout as those started under lights. Also, temperatures by a window fluctuate greatly, and you can end up with frost bitten tips where foliage touched the glass. When I give out this piece of information, I inevitably have people say, "Well, I start my seedlings in front of a window and they do just fine." My response? "Just think how much better your yield would be if they were starting off under the best conditions."

**FB Advice:** Plant in tires because the black rubber really heats up the soil. **Fact:** Rubber tires leech chemicals into the soil, so do not plant edibles in them unless you line them with food grade plastic. Better yet, just plant flowers in them, and not flowers you plan to eat.

I want to make it clear that not all the advice given on the site is wrong, but a lot of it is. The problem is that you have no idea how much Interior gardening experience the contributors have. Beginning gardeners would be best served by finding a copy of "Alaska Gardening Guide" by local Ann D. Roberts. Or contact the Alaska Cooperative Extension Service, either by phone, in person or online. They are a terrific resource; do consider taking their very detailed Master Gardener course. Finally, several of our local nurseries offer short classes on different topics, such as container gardening and raising dahlias; I have never taken one where I did not come away having learned something.

(However, if you want to see some of the most impressive pictures of hot pepper plants ever, look for posts Uriah Nalikak regularly makes on the Fairbanks Gardeners Facebook page. He is awesome!)

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