

## HOW TO SELECT HEALTHY VEGETABLE STARTS

I visit homes/gardens all over San Diego county, many of which contain a vegetable garden. Throughout my many years of experience diagnosing plant problems, I would say that the vast majority (80-90%) of veggie garden problems ultimately result from lack of water or inconsistent watering.

However, in the last couple of years, I have found that my diagnoses have shifted significantly, which is the main inspiration for this article. Lately I have found that about half of all veggie problems now result from having purchased stressed out or otherwise unhealthy plants/starts.

Based on my observations, many nurseries (and *all* “box stores”) have many vegetable starts for sale that are severely stressed plants that will not perform (i.e. produce food for you). For many reasons, amongst the retailer’s inventory are some vegetable starts that simply will not do much of anything once purchased and planted.

As a result, there are many people who purchase these stressed out plants, nothing happens, and they think they stink at gardening and give it up. That is truly sad.

Most nursery retailers either do not pull from sale old stressed veggie starts or they simply do not realize that some of the starts they have in stock are severely stressed. So what’s the problem?

### **The difference between landscaping plants and vegetable starts**

Why are some of the veggie starts in nurseries stressed out and non-productive? One of the key aspects to understanding this dilemma stems from the difference between vegetable starts and typical landscaping plants. What’s the difference?

Landscaping plants are mature plants, at least a year or two old or several years old, depending on the type of plant and size of container. Vegetable starts on the other hand are seedlings less than a few weeks or a couple months old. *They are baby plants.* We want baby vegetable starts that are old enough (i.e. have enough of a root system) to handle transplanting, but not too old that they’ve sat in their little pots for too long.

Another big difference between landscaping plants and vegetable starts is that landscaping plants are designed to be planted, *and last for many, many*

years. Veggie starts on the other hand are designed to “do something” in a short amount of time, get harvested, and be replaced, sometimes within just a few weeks or a couple of months.

Landscaping plants are more forgiving if occasionally not given ideal conditions (e.g. lack of water). Veggie starts, on the other hand, are not forgiving at all. Like all babies, if they are not getting what they truly need, they cry, really loud too. Traumatized children can take years to pull out of it, but our veggie starts only have a few months. For most crops, a couple of missed waterings in that little 6-pack, and it’s all over; *they will not perform* (i.e. produce food).

### **The plant has been sitting on the shelf way too long**

Veggie starts must be pulled from the shelf if not purchased in a reasonable amount of time. How long is that? Well, it depends on the plant. Many crops will not produce what you want, if left in their container more than two weeks or so after they arrive at the retail nursery.

For example, this past winter I saw one nursery selling several flats of broccoli in 6pack with little broccoli heads starting to form. “Isn’t that cute, honey?” No. Those plants will never make a nice head of broccoli now. They’re junk.

Do not purchased corn starts over 6-8” tall. They will grow, but they won’t produce the two to three nice and full ears of corn on each plant that you should get. They’ve been in the pot too long to produce “corn.”

That little 6-pack or 4” pot is really not something in which to “grow” a plant. The 6-pack or 4” pot is a “carrier” to get the plant from the grower to the retailer and then to you. Those veggie seedlings **MUST** be removed from those little pots asap. After purchasing, if you don’t get around to planting them for a week, they are likely toast, and will not perform.

If the grower sells the retailer overgrown plants (i.e. plants that have grown too big for too long in their little pots) which does sometimes happen, the consumer is destined for failure.

When seedlings sit in the pot too long, they develop a lot of roots that the little 6-pack or 4” pot simply cannot accommodate. With so many roots, the retailer will likely not be able to keep up on sufficiently watering them = another source of stress.

### **The plants have missed too many waterings**

It takes a skilled waterer to water every cell in every 6-pack in every tray on a table with 30 trays of starts. Occasionally one gets missed. If a pot gets missed a couple of times, it's should pretty obvious to the retailer, and those plants *must* be removed from sale. The sad fact is, and I see this in a lot of nurseries, they are not pulling these plants, and you end up purchasing this stress.

### **The signs of “bad starts”**

Avoid plants with missing leaves, pale leaves, or yellow leaves. We want a green plant (except for something like red leaf lettuce, of course). Take the plant out of its pot and inspect the roots (go ahead, it's ok); avoid plants with tons of roots or roots wound up in the bottom of the pot.

For tomatoes (perhaps a whole blog could be written just on how to pick a good tomato start), avoid plants with the bottom leaves missing or yellow. Avoid plants with purple tinted leaf veins or purple stems. The purple tinted results from hot roots: an indication that the plant has either been in the pot too long and/or has missed watering. We want to see a green tomato plant.

Avoid veggie starts with flowers; an exception might be peppers. Definitely do not purchase starts of any salad greens (e.g. lettuce, kale, spinach, mustard greens) with flowers. When salad greens begin to flower (i.e. bolt), they are trying to die.

### **What do I look for to purchase healthy veggie starts**

Rarely will you ever purchase a landscaping plant from a nursery that is a seedling. Even plants in 1 gallon pots that are grown from cuttings are likely in their second year. Almost all veggie starts are seedlings only a few weeks or a couple of months old.

Therefore, bigger is definitely *not* better when it comes to veggie starts. For a given type of plant, a bigger plant has been growing in its little pot longer than a smaller plant – we don't want that.

Take the plant out of its pot and inspect the roots. Remember = baby plants. We should not see lots of roots wound up in the bottom of the pot.

Do not buy a plant in which leaves are obviously missing. Remember we're talking about baby plants which should not be missing any leaves. Missing

leaves typically indicates missed watering but also could indicate damage in shipping or that the plant has been in the pot too long.

Always buy vegetable starts from independent garden centers like Walter Andersen Nursery or Armstrong's Garden Centers. It's the best chance you have at purchasing healthy vegetable starts.