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University of Idaho Extension  
Extension Educator  
Mike Bauer 263-8511

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

## HARDENING OFF PLANTS FOR OUTSIDE PLANTING

Laurie Brown

Shortly before the average last frost date, it's time to start hardening off your young plants, whether you raised them from seed or bought them. They have been coddled so far in their young lives, protected from the elements. The only exceptions are plants that you've purchased from local growers who have already hardened them off. Even a plant that is hardy when mature, like cabbage, is not able to take frost when it is a seedling.

Many people don't understand what hardening off is about. Many know that the young plants must be acclimatized to cold gradually, but there is more to it.

First, if you have grown the seedlings yourself, let the soil dry out completely before watering the plants while trying not to let them wilt. This will cause the roots to grow deeper in search of water. Start this a couple of weeks before the actual hardening process.

Two weeks before the date you want to set the plants out, start putting them outdoors for short amounts of time. Do this in the morning or late afternoon, not the middle of the day. Keep them protected from wind and full sun. Leave them out a couple of hours the first day, gradually increasing the time outside. This will allow the plants to build stronger cell walls and sturdier stems, which will keep them from drying out easily. They will also start to darken in color as they build chlorophyll, which keeps the leaves from burning in the sun. Near the end of the two weeks, they will be able to take being out all day and night.

Right before you transplant, water them well. Transplant on a cloudy day or in the evening, when they will have time to get over shock before being exposed to full sun. If it is windy, give them protection by placing something, like a lawn chair on it's side, upwind of them to prevent drying out. Keep them well watered and do not fertilize for a week. Be prepared to cover them if a late frost threatens, which seems to happen more times than not.

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This should get your plants off to their best start, and you'll have vegetables and flowers earlier than if you let the seedlings get stressed.

*Laurie Brown is owner of of North Star Farm and teaches classes in plant propagation for University of Idaho Master Gardeners in Bonner County. She has been involved with the Bonner County Master Gardener Program since 1996.*

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