

Cold Frames and Hotbeds

A cold frame or its heated version, the hot bed, is a miniature greenhouse used to extend the growing season into the early spring and late fall. Heat for the cold frame comes from the sun. During the day, the sun heats the soil and at night, a cover prevents heat loss. Ventilation is accomplished by raising or lowering the cover. Hot beds are similar but warmed with a heating cable buried in the soil. Use cold frames or hot beds to start seeds, cuttings, over-winter tender plants, or for growing crops of smaller plants.

Cold frames or hot beds are commonly made from old window sashes although you can construct one from new materials including polyethylene film or fiberglass. The sides consist of wooden boards partially buried in the soil for maximum warmth. The back of the bed should be higher so that the cover will be at an angle to allow more light penetration. Weather-strip the joints and paint the interior black to retain more heat.

Be sure to use electrical equipment designed for outdoor use in the hot beds. A 250-watt cable will adequately heat a 3 by 5 foot structure. Arrange the cable so that it is not kinked and then cover it with 2 inches of sand, followed by 4 inches of soil. Use a thermostat to control soil temperatures with 70-75 degree Fahrenheit being ideal to germinate most seeds.

Situate the cold frame or hot bed so that the cover faces south. Ideal locations are near buildings, as condensation within the structure may make it unnecessary to water except infrequently.

The **Master Gardener Hotline** is open from April to October, Monday through Friday. Lines are available 9:00 am to noon and 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm at 888-678-3464

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