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Build a cold frame now for planting later

By Jean Lovell Center for Resource Conservation
Posted: 05/02/2011 03:41:18 PM MDT

Q. Do you have suggestions for making a vegetable garden more affordable?

A. In my experience the most affordable way to grow vegetables is to start early and end the season late. With Boulder's cold nights and the occasional chance of snow in both spring and fall, it's wise to protect your plants. A cold frame does this nicely, providing direct sun and a warm space conducive to growing. Starting plants early means by late spring they will be well established and you may be eating fresh veggies when your neighbors are just beginning to plant.

A cold frame with removable glass or plastic gets you off to a good start. Placement to get good sunlight is important. A southern exposure is best with eastern a close second. If you have the space, putting it against a wall of your house can add to its warmth and protection. Pay attention to existing shade trees that can provide too much shade when they leaf out. Size is another consideration. I suggest a maximum of 4 feet in width to allow for weeding and harvesting.

The big advantage is that no transplanting is required. Your plants will be well established and continue to be productive where you plant them. Two potential problems rise from the weather: On sunny days you'll need to open the windows to prevent the sun from frying your plants. If you expect a few days of freezing temperatures, cover the entire frame with some old blankets to keep it warmer.

Most cold frames consist of a wood frame 1 to 2 feet high and topped with old windows. You could use cinder blocks. Tops can be hinged or easily removed. Build the frame to fit the windows you'll be using, and add something to weigh them down so they don't blow off during our winter winds.

These materials are available at the ReSource Yard, a division of Center for ReSource Conservation, located at 6400 Arapahoe Road. At the same location you can also borrow tools from the ReSource Tool Library to be able to make your cold frame. On Saturday, CRC is hosting a Plant Sale and ReSource Conservation Fair at ReSource and it will include a class on making raised beds which is a great foundation for your cold frame.

While it's late in the season to use a cold frame this spring, you can be ready to plant in late summer and early fall for plants that overwinter for next season.

Jean Lovell is a volunteer who has spent more than 10 years sharing her time and knowledge with the Center for ReSource Conservation. CRC is a non-profit organization that implements programs for the Boulder County community through the Waste (Deconstruction/Re-Use), Energy, and Water Divisions. Visit conservationcenter.org or call CRC for further information on xeric gardens, compost, mulch, and the Garden-In-A-Box program. Call 303-999-3820 www.conservationcenter.org

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