

Benefits of a Cold Frame

By Joseph Parish



Several years ago, I took my grandson to a place in Maryland known as furnace town for a field trip. He was home schooled and we were studying colonial living in his social studies class. While we were strolling around the facilities, I gave a closer look at the garden area since I knew I would be buying a small homestead in the near future. In the garden area they had constructed a rather simple cold frame. My thoughts were that someday I too would construct a couple of these cold frames myself – well folks that day has come.

Cold frames represent an alternative method of getting plants started for the season and are generally inexpensively and simple to build. Their popularity stems (no pun intended) from their ability to provide a means of propagating seeds at the start of spring. The lid or sash can readily be opened during the warm days but easily closed when the night temperatures begin to drop. They are also usable during the fall to gain another month or two of growing season.

A frequent use for cold frames is to "harden off" seedlings prior to placing them openly into your garden. This will prevent the plants from going into shock. It can be employed for propagating new cuttings which have been taken from one of your favorite plants. While in the later seasons of the year you will find it useful to extend your growing season for your cool weather crops.

The amount of effort which you expend on your frame is actually a matter of personal desire. I have this thing that if I am going to make something, I want it to look as ascetically and attractive as possible. I would often rather spend a few extra dollars for material than use older, used wood that presents a shabby appearance.

Although a cold frame traditionally requires no electricity some gardeners have placed heating pads in them to boost the growing of their seedlings. Generally, these units utilize the solar heat from the sun for generating the warmth. Often a well-constructed cold frame is built in such a manner that it can be moved from one section of your garden plot to another with ease.

When considering the construction of your cold frame you have a wealth of materials at your command. They can be created from brick, wood, concrete or any materials readily at hand. If you chose to employ lumber in its construction you would be wise to give cedar or cypress a serious thought. Old windows are an excellent source for your sashes as they can be hinged allowing you to open and close them at will.

Think carefully on the size you select for your cold frame. It should be small enough that you can work comfortably in it which equates to approximately three to four feet wide. Here again I like to make use of standard lengths for both simplicity and economy. In my case our cold frames will be four feet wide. Either way you will want to keep it to a size where you can comfortably plant seeds, weed your area and harvest without undue efforts. Remember the golden rule - gardening should be fun.

When using your cold frame keep in mind that as the warm weather arrives you can provide the necessary ventilation by raising the sash slightly. This will allow you the opportunity to avoid excessive temperatures within the cold frame. If you know that your evening temperatures will be dropping down drastically you will want to close the sash before those cooler temperatures arrive. This will keep some of the hot air temperatures inside the frame for the evening.

Bamboo shades can be installed on your cold frame to prevent the hot summer heat and sunlight from damaging your plants. It will allow you to regulate the amount of time that your plants receive sunlight. My goal is to build about three or four cold frames to use in the greenhouse area.