**Lumpkin County Extension Service**

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**Get a Head Start with Cold Frames**

Through the years I have heard a lot of gardeners say, “I wish I had a greenhouse. Then I could grow my own vegetable transplants.” Well, there is certainly nothing wrong with wanting a greenhouse. Unfortunately, they can take a lot of space in the landscape and the price tag is pretty hefty. For many gardeners there is a more simple and affordable solution—cold frames and hot beds.

Compared to a lot of areas in the U.S. we have a relatively long growing season. The first few warm days of late winter, however, trigger an urge in most gardeners. We want to get started planting! For centuries gardeners have searched for ways to protect tender young plants from cold weather. I am told that bell-shaped covers made of pottery or wicker can be traced back to 1629 in Britain. Today, a simple cold frame or hot bed can provide protection for tender new plants.

A cold frame is simply a bottomless box with some type of clear cover that is set on the ground. The cover allows sunlight to penetrate into the interior. I remember watching my grandfather build a cold frame. He used scrap lumber to build the four sides. The side walls sloped toward the front of the cold frame. They were only a couple of feet high at the lowest point. He used some old windows he had salvaged to make the top. Granddaddy hinged the windows to the back wall so they could be raised to access the interior of the cold frame.

He located the structure in a sunny spot near the vegetable garden. If the weather was unseasonably warm, he would prop the windows partially open to keep the cold frame from getting too hot. A southern or southeastern exposure is best for your cold frame. Also, it is good to locate the cold frame on a slight slope for good drainage. Locations that have a wall or thick hedge on the north side of the cold frame will provide protection from winter winds.

A hot bed is simply a variation that includes a buried layer of manure in the bottom of the frame that slowly decomposes. This composting process generates some additional heat.

The beauty of these structures is that they provide an intermediate location for tender young plants. After starting them indoors you move them to the cold frame to harden them before planting them in the garden. Advanced gardeners, however, can actually use large cold frames to extend production into the cold weather months.

Retired UGA Extension Horticulturist, Dr. Wayne McLaurin says, “Lettuce, spinach, radishes, green onions, or other cool-weather crops will thrive in the cold frame. Straw bales make effective insulation in the coldest part of winter. Another way to keep the structure warm is to keep several light bulbs burning during the extreme cold.” During warmer weather sunlight passing through the cover will collect inside and provide adequate warmth.

Building a cold frame is an excellent winter project for the gardener who is also a do-it-yourselfer. Cold frames can be made very inexpensively. The only new materials in Granddaddy’s cold frame were the hinges. If appearance is important to you, then you will want to buy new materials. That will make your cold frame a little more expensive. But it will still be a lot less expensive than a greenhouse!