



A20 Thinning seedlings



Having a few extra seedlings is a useful backup in case of losses, but plants become straggly and crops poor if plants are overcrowded. Thinning removes the weaker plants so seedlings can grow into strong individuals ready for potting on (A21) or transplanting (A11 and 22). Thinning is useful in both pots/trays and in rows in the soil.

Resources

- Seedlings that need thinning
- Hand fork or trowel

Activity

- 1 Choose mild weather when the soil is moist. Water if necessary.
- 2 Start thinning seedlings when they are large enough to handle.
- 3 Follow instructions on the next page for thinning seedlings
 - a In pots/trays
 - b In the soil
- 4 Some thinnings are edible like salad leaves, others can be transplanted to fill gaps left by uneven germination or loss of seedlings by pest and disease. Otherwise add thinnings to the compost heap.

Extended activities

- 1 Discuss how seedlings compete with each other in natural environments, eg what happens to the strongest plants; why do plants stretch towards the light?

Health & Safety	Wash hands after handling compost and soil. <i>See also Health and Safety Guidelines (Section B3.3)</i>
Further information	A11 Planting in containers A18 Sowing seed A21 Potting on seedlings A22 Transplanting young plants B5.3 Thinning seedlings Food Growing Instruction Cards

Instructions for thinning seedlings

a In pots/trays

- 1 Choose the strongest seedling to remain.

In pots or trays, leave seedlings growing in the centre rather than around the edges. This allows every plant an equal amount of growing space after thinning.



- 2 For plants grown as individuals (eg cabbage, tomatoes, larger lettuces), thin seedlings to leave one per pot or module.

If preferred, leave 2-3 seedlings for plants that can grow in clusters, such as leafy salads (eg loose leaf lettuce).



- 3 Gently pull out seedlings with roots. For smaller seedlings, cut the stem off using a fingernail and thumb.



- 4 Seedlings can be transplanted to fill gaps in a tray or into pots for more plants (see A21).



- 5 Lightly firm the compost around the remaining seedlings if needed and water to help them settle.



b *In the soil*

- 1 Gently pull out seedlings with roots using a hand fork or trowel to loosen the soil if needed. Cut the stem of smaller seedlings using a fingernail and thumb.



- 2 Thin to final spacing in stages to allow for any loss from pests and diseases. Leave seedlings just clear of neighbouring plants at each stage, harvesting larger seedlings (such as baby carrots). Don't leave thinnings lying around as the scent released by crushing leaves can attract pests, eg carrot root flies.



- 3 If seedlings are growing to maturity in situ, continue thinning until plants reach the required spacing. Otherwise transplant seedlings, eg leeks and cabbages, to their final location for growing to maturity (A22).

Dig up clumps of seedlings for transplanting with as much soil as possible and transplant to fill any gaps.

