

Grow Your Own Peppers

Looking for something a bit different than the run-of-the-mill peppers you get from the grocery store? Try growing your own peppers. Similar in many ways to tomatoes, they are in fact members of the same family, the Solanaceae (potato or nightshade family). So, if you've ever grown a tomato then you should be well prepared to take on peppers.

PLANTING

Peppers need a warm spot in full sun (8hrs sunlight/day) or they get spindly and won't produce mature fruit. Your soil should have a pH of 5.5 - 6.8, be fertile, deep, well-drained, and rich in organic matter. If you have soggy soil then consider building a raised bed. However, you want soil that holds water evenly since irregular watering can cause flower drop, and blossom-end rot. Incorporate a good amount of compost or organic matter, a good guideline is 7.5cm of organic matter into the top 15cm of soil. If necessary, bring down the acidity of your soil by adding dolomite lime in the spring. This will help with nutrient uptake and prevent blossom end rot.

Make sure to follow good garden hygiene and rotate your crops. Diseases that affect all members of the nightshade family (Solanaceae) such as, tomatoes, eggplants, and potatoes, can reside in the soil and affect and other crops. To break the disease cycle, and to help get rid of the disease-causing organisms, rotate peppers with unrelated crops, such as corn, beans or lettuce.

SPACING

The best spacing for most pepper plants is between 30-46cm (12-18") apart. Although there are some exceptions so make sure to check your labels/seed package.

GROWING IN CONTAINERS

Peppers are great for growing in containers as they love warm soil temperatures. Use a sterilized potting soil, such as GARDENWORKS Planter Box Mix, to guarantee that your soil is free of disease. A 5-gallon black nursery pot is the perfect size for one pepper plant, and the black colour will help it heat up in the sun providing root warmth. Dig in a few handfuls of a tomato/vegetable fertilizer. To avoid the dreaded nutrient deficiency blossom end rot, remember to be consistent with watering and add a few handfuls of dolomite lime or use a specific product such as Cal-Mag or MagiCal (which contains the needed micronutrients).

WATERING

Keep plants well-watered all season, especially during dry weather. Use a soft spray so as not to disturb the roots, and keep water off the leaves. Most gardeners find that our summers are plenty rainy enough for peppers, in fact perhaps too much. So, they prefer to grow their peppers under the cover of a balcony or overhang. This allows total control over watering, which is an important step in preventing blight. Blight is a fungal disease that needs water on the leaves to grow. If you keep the leaves dry then the blight can't grow.

FERTILIZING

Once your peppers are growing, consider sprinkling on some slow-release fertilizer following the package directions. Or a great organic option is GARDENWORKS Liquid Organic Tomato & Vegetable Food 3-1-4.

HARVESTING

The best tasting peppers ripen on the vine, so leave them on the vine until they are fully ripe. Make sure to pick gently being careful not to bruise it. Hold the vine in one hand and pull on the pepper with the other. When a heavy frost is predicted pick all the fruit, even if unripe. Allow them to ripen at room temperature or slightly cooler, by wrapping each individually in tissue or newspaper and placing them in shallow boxes, stem side down. Check frequently and remove any with bad spots. After they reach full colour store them in the refrigerator.

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HOW HOT IS IT

The general rule is the smaller the pepper the hotter it is. Pepper heat is measured using the Scoville scale, the higher the number the hotter the pepper. It is the measurement of how many litres of water would be needed to dilute the heat so it doesn't burn anymore. A Scoville reading of 5000 means it would take 5000L of water to dilute out the heat.

WHY ARE PEPPERS HOT?

Some plants are trying to avoid getting eaten. They may grow in places difficult to approach, look unappetizing, have vile smells, are fuzzy, hairy, sticky, or have thorns. One of the most efficient ways for a plant to deter a herbivore is to make something that will give the plant bad taste, induce vomiting or even pain. In a few cases they may even be toxic and poisonous.

But some plants want to have certain parts eaten so they can propagate themselves. So, they evolved fruits. The seeds are enveloped in meaty, juicy, tasty packages of pure energy. Those fruits often evolve a sweet smell that can be detected from a distance. And the fruits are often advertised with bright colours.

Hot peppers are a real evolutionary conundrum. On one hand, they are boldly coloured and sweet-smelling fruits, an obvious sign of advertising to herbivores. On the other hand, they are far too hot and spicy to be a pleasant experience to the animal. So, what gives? Capsaicin is the "hot chemical" in peppers that elicits a sensation of pain when it binds to the tastebuds on the tongue. All mammals have capsaicin receptors, but birds do not. So, mammals avoid hot peppers but the birds gorge on them.

The "antidote" for too much pepper-capsaicin is dairy and in particular ice cream. Not only does it offer immediate relief from the feeling of heat, the calcium in the ice cream binds to the receptor that's stimulated by the capsaicin and helps stop the pain reaction. Some restaurants that offer super spicy food have creamsicles on hand for folks that think they can handle the super-hot stuff, but then end up realizing the error of their ways.

It's slightly ironic that the pepper's defence against being eaten by man has turned into an advantage. We now cultivate these plants in far greater numbers than they would appear in the wild.