

How to grow peppers

Pepper (*Capsicum annuum*)

Family: Solanaceae (Nightshade)

Season: Warm

Ease of growing: Moderate

Nutrient needs: Medium

Water needs: Medium-high

Common propagation: Transplants

Seed facts

Germination temperatures: 60°F to 95°F

Germination time: 7 to 28 days

Viability: 2 to 4 years

Transplants

Weeks to grow transplant: 6 to 8

Start: April-May

Plant out: late May to June

Planning facts

Spacing: 12" to 18" in 24" to 36" rows

Plants per square foot: 1/2 to 3/4

Days to harvest: 50 to 70 from transplanting

Variety selection

Peppers are a spicy addition to the backyard garden. The commonly grown bell pepper is large, mild flavored and sweet, but there are an incredible diversity of peppers with other colors, shapes and degrees of heat. The spiciness of peppers is measured by Scoville heat units, which increase with the level of a chemical called capsaicin that's responsible for their heat. Some well-known hot peppers and their Scoville units are as follows: Anaheim (1,000), Jalapeno (4,000), Tabasco (40,000), and Habanero (300,000). The hottest pepper in the world is known as "bhut jolokia" and has a Scoville rating of over one million!

Preparation and planting

Well-drained soils with abundant phosphorous are preferred. High calcium levels are also helpful for avoiding blossom end-rot. Transplants with flower buds, but no flowers are ideal.

Care

Though peppers are not difficult to grow, yield is easily reduced by very cool temperatures (55°F or less) or very hot weather (90°F). Adverse temperatures and low humidity will cause blossom drop. Peppers need a constant and even moisture supply during blossoming and fruiting. Avoid overhead irrigation to prevent disease development. Pepper growth can also be accelerated with use of black plastic mulches. In windy, exposed areas, support peppers with stakes to avoid broken stems. Like tomatoes, peppers will not tolerate frost.

Major pests

Insects: Flea beetles, cutworms, aphids, European corn borer, Colorado potato beetle, whiteflies.

Diseases: Phytophthora, Septoria leaf spot, early and late blight, anthracnose, Fusarium and Verticillium wilts, bacterial spot, tobacco mosaic virus.

Harvesting and storage

Harvest peppers in their green immature state or allow them to develop their red, yellow or orange color. Cut the pods rather than pull them from the vines to avoid disturbing the roots. Use peppers fresh, dried whole or crushed, and frozen. Once picked, peppers are sensitive to chilling injury and should not be stored at temperatures below 50°F.

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