



Tucson
Organic
Gardeners

soiling our hands since 1971

Peter Piper Picked A Peck Of

Before 1800, Peter Piper would have had a difficult job picking a peck of peppers, because American gardeners were not enamored of sweet or bell peppers. However the countries of Spain and Italy and in the French border area, chefs discovered this large green mild *Capsicum* in the early 1700's. On the other hand the chili, called "Bird-pepper" because of growing on a bush having small leaves and fruit, was much loved by Europeans and which was imported by explorers to the New World. Medicinal attributes were given to the chili pepper grown in physic gardens.

MANY KINDS

Today's gardeners can choose from 20 species of sweet peppers, amounting to hundreds of cultivators. A colorful bed not only has many red and green varieties, but yellow, purple, orange, and white peppers are now available. Also one can find sizes ranging from cherries and hearts to bananas and eight-inch blocks. Seeds can be heirlooms or hybrids, and of Japanese or Hungarian origin. The back page of the catalog, "The Pepper Gal", lists the Scoville Heat Units of peppers. For instance, *Caribbean Red Habanero* has registered 445,000 Scovilles, but the sweet pimento bell registers none! Several things to consider are these: where in my landscape will peppers do their best, and what varieties do I wish to plant.

TENDERNESS

Since peppers come from the tropics, the plants do well in the Southwest desert area. If the plants are to winter over, they must be protected. Construct a wire cage over the plant or the bed that can be covered when frost occurs. Another method is to plant one sweet or two chilies in a large pot that can be moved to shelter.

Garden centers sell transplants when the season is correct for the plants to flourish. However to obtain a variety of sizes, shapes, and heat, one can order seed from catalogs and raise the plants indoors six weeks before the last frost is due. The New Mexico varieties do the best in the desert. If these are not available at nurseries, then order seeds by mail.

TO PLANT

Pepper seeds are small. Use a favorite potting mix, or try this recipe. Layer a pot or flat with pebbles or coarse material. Screen one part sand, one part soil, and one part compost. Water the mix until it is moistened, but not wet. If it is too wet, let the mix set for an hour or so, until it is just damp. Fill the flat or pot. Sprinkle the seed sparsely. Lightly sift soil over the seeds. The soil must remain moist, but not soggy. For very detailed instructions of raising seeds and transplanting, see [The Edible Pepper Garden](#) by Rosalind Creasy.

Do not use manure in the bed unless several months will pass before planting the seed or plants. The manure needs to be well rotted. But do add several inches of compost. Five inches is not too much. Use rock phosphate and kelp meal in the planting soil mix. The smaller peppers do not need much nitrogen, but to produce the large bells and chilies, apply nitrogen such as cottonseed meal or kelp meal just as the plant begins to bloom. Remember that when nights are cool, it will take longer for peppers to mature.

TRANSPLANTING

After the first two leaves appear, wait until two more leaves have grown and the plant is at least three inches tall, and then transplant to individual pots. Six plants of one variety should be enough to supply a family with fruit all season. Please remember that the seeds need moisture to germinate, seedlings need irrigation to flourish, and mature plants must not be stressed for lack of water, but too much water can be fatal. The bed must drain well or the peppers will develop diseases. Also the roots will rot.

TEMPERATURES

Peppers do not like to be cold. However high temperatures, above 90 degrees, and low humidity can cause blossom drop. When the soil and air temperature are above 55 degrees, set the transplants in a

permanent spot. Compost placed around the plants one inch away from the stems will retain moisture and keep the roots cool. Chilies can take the heat of summer, but bells should have afternoon shade to prevent leaf scald. The bushy plants can be 30 inches tall. Close planting increases humidity. Peppers are ideal for small beds or container gardening, producing abundant fruit for the small space they occupy.

PESTS AND DISEASES

To prevent cutworms from decimating the young tender plants, place two or three toothpicks around the plants. Or make a collar about three inches high and insert in the soil around each plant. Peppers are susceptible to aphids and whiteflies. Use a stream of water to dislodge the pests, or an organic spray if the infestation is heavy. By inspecting the plants often, pests can be controlled. When making a spray from the kitchen, do not use tobacco in any form. Although tobacco kills any insect upon contact, the chance of infecting any nightshade plant with mosaic disease is very high. This virus will cause the leaves to be malformed and become mottled in color. The plant's growth is stunted and it will die. More to the point, these viruses travel, so destroy any plant that is so affected. Do not put in the compost pile. Wrap it in disposable material, put it in the trash, and immediately wash the hands and tools thoroughly. Check the plants for hornworms and Colorado potato beetles.

FERTILIZER

Feed peppers lightly with either cottonseed meal or fish emulsion. Magnesium deficiency causes several problems, such as leaf drop, less fruit, and susceptibility to sunscald. Dissolve 1 tablespoon Epsom salts in 2 quarts of water and feed the plants. Make compost or manure tea for fertilizer. When using these liquids, dilute with water and foliar feed. Put the mixture in a spray bottle. Spray the leaves in the early morning before the sun touches the plants. This method of fertilizing can be done every three or four weeks.

USES

To use the peppers, cut from the stem. Twisting or plucking could uproot the whole plant, which will probably end its life. Using the peppers as they become the size needed for pickles or for using in salads will prolong the growth of new fruit. If the harvest is very abundant, peppers can be sliced or diced and frozen for soups and stews. This process can be done at either the green or ripe stage. Many peppers can also be dried and crushed. Pickle the small varieties. Save seeds from heirloom types, but not hybrids. The plants raised from hybrids will seldom germinate. Store in glass jars and label for use next season. Pepper seeds can be stored for several years.

COMPANION PLANTING

Chili peppers are noted for their high Vitamin C content. All peppers supply Vitamin A and several important minerals. CHILLIES AND BELLS WILL MIX EASILY. The bells will become hot. Be sure to separate the plants by at least 20 feet. The wind will carry the pollen. Tomato plants are very compatible and can be grown in the same bed. Place some marigolds among the new transplants to repel aphids. Use alyssum as a border to attract pollinators. No matter what garden space is available, when choosing plants do consider this easy-to-grow and colorful vegetable.

References: The Edible Pepper Garden, by Rosalind Creasy; The Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening by Rodale Press; The Fine Art of Salad Gardening by E Annie Proulx; The Organic Gardener's Complete Guide to Vegetables, by editors of Rodale Press; The Pepper Gal catalog, P O Box 23006, Ft. Lauderdale, FL, 33307-3006; Western Garden Book by Sunset Publishing Lois H Lockhart 1-99