

PEPPER

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens

Overview

Pepper, *Capsicum spp.*, is a warm season vegetable of the Solanaceae family and is related to eggplant, tomatoes, and potatoes. Peppers can be categorized as sweet or hot. Green sweet peppers are actually picked immature, and if left to ripen, have a sweeter flavor and turn a different color including red, black, brown, orange, or yellow. The heat in hot peppers is attributed to capsaicin oil. Removing the seeds and interior ribs of the pepper will tone down the heat. Sweet and hot peppers are a source of vitamins A and C.

Choosing Varieties

There are several varieties of peppers available that differ in fruit color, size, shape, and heat, as well as other traits. A few recommended varieties for Missouri and other Mid-west states are:

Sweet Pepper

- California Wonder (ripens to red)
- Chocolate Belle (disease resistant, early)
- King Arthur (prolific, ripens to red)
- Orange Belle II (compact plants, prolific)

Hot Pepper

- Habanero (very hot, ripens to orange)
- Hungarian Wax (thin, long fruit, ripens to red)
- Jalapeno (can be harvested over a long period)
- Long Red Slim Cayenne (classic hot flavor)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

Planting Tips

The pepper is a warm season vegetable and cannot tolerate cold weather.

For best results, seedlings should be transplanted into the garden instead of direct seeding. In Missouri, seedlings can be planted mid-to-late May when the danger of a freeze has passed, and the soil has warmed sufficiently.

Seeds can be started indoors under lights about 8 weeks before the frost-free date. Seeds should be planted about



¼-½ inch deep in containers or cell packs with well-drained potting soil. The potting medium should not be allowed to dry completely. Seedlings should be hardened off before transplanting by setting plants outside in the shade a week before planting.

Pepper seedlings should be planted at the same depth as they were in containers at a spacing of about 18 inches within the row and about 2 feet between rows. Remove flowers at time of planting and for a week afterwards to encourage the plant to become established before producing fruit. Sowing instructions for a particular variety can usually be found on the seed packet.

Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Pepper seedlings should be planted in well-drained soils and would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost. Water is important for the establishment of transplants and formation of fruits. Mulch can be spread around the plants to conserve moisture and reduce weeds. Blossom drop occurs when the temperatures are below 60°F or above 90°F.

European corn borer larvae make a small hole at the top of the sweet peppers and then eat away at the inside. By dusting the foliage with an insecticide like Sevin (be sure to follow product labels) before the moths lay their eggs, an infestation can be prevented. An organic alternative to Sevin, an insecticide with Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) such as Dipel or Thuricide should be used before an outbreak occurs. Aphids feed on pepper plants and are a vector of diseases. They can be controlled using insecticidal soaps.

Verticillium and fusarium wilts can be avoided by planting resistant varieties. Members of the Solanaceae family should be rotated with other crops to avoid buildup of soil borne diseases.

Harvesting

Sweet peppers can be harvested when they feel firm when lightly squeezed. They can be harvested at the green stage or left to ripen to their mature color. Hot peppers are usually picked after the fruit has fully ripened. Less damage is done to the plant if the peppers are cut rather than pulled. Use caution when handling hot peppers. Capsaicin oil from the peppers can irritate the skin, nose, and eyes.

Seed Sources

Pepper seedlings are available in the spring at local garden centers. Seeds can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Johnny's Selected Seeds (1-877-564-6697, johnnyseeds.com) and Burpee Seeds (1-800-888-1447, burpee.com) are two companies that sell pepper varieties.

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