

Peppers: The Real Story

Did you know that peppers have 2 sexes? Male and female. As an example, 3 lobed bells are considered Males and are best used for frying. 4 lobes bells are considered Female and are best for stuffing and salads. Non-bells are all Males. That said, peppers are a breeze to grow. Basically, you plant them and watch them take off! But, for maximum production, a little pampering helps. Plant peppers in a bed that receives full sun (at least 6 hours a day and contains plenty of organic matter. Now, unless you want **all** hot peppers, keep hots and sweets well separated. Depending on the size of the pepper varieties planted, spacing should be 12-18 inches apart. Most sweet peppers mature in 60-90 days; hot peppers can take up to 150 days. Keep in mind, however, that the number of days to maturity stated on the seed packet refers to the days after transplanting until the plant produces a full-sized fruit. You will need to add 6-8 weeks for the time between sowing and transplanting which means most of us usually start pepper plants indoors in December and January.

Prepare the Soil and Plant

The right site and soil will make a world of difference in how peppers do. Choose a sunny, well-drained spot where peppers haven't grown recently. Peppers like warmth, so wait to plant until all frost danger has passed. If possible, set out your peppers on a cloudy day to help reduce stress on the plants. Space plants 12 to 20 inches apart, depending on the mature size of the variety, and set them a bit deeper than they were in their containers. (Like tomatoes, peppers grow extra roots from the buried part of the stem.) Consider staking or caging some varieties so that the stems do not break in strong winds or because of a large fruit load. After you plant the pepper seedlings, water them well. In addition, to maintain a proper balance, before transplanting, work some organic matter into the soil to enhance moisture retention.

Feed Your Soil

Peppers and tomatoes are heavy feeders, so they need plenty of organic food. Plants get all their nutrients from the soil, so it can be depleted quickly. Avoid adding too much nitrogen because that will cause pepper plants to grow fast but make them more susceptible to disease and less productive. I suggest a balanced vegetable fertilizer such as **Miracle Grow** or **Arizona's Best** Vegetable fertilizer. Used monthly, it will provide a slow release that improves the soil and it is balanced with calcium to help prevent blossom rot. Water well after feeding. **Warning!** Don't overfertilize. This tends to make the pepper plants develop lush foliage at the expense of fruit production. If you work 5-10-10 fertilizer into the soil prior to transplanting, that's probably sufficient. You can also side-dress the plants with a light sprinkling of 5-10-10 when blossoming starts, just to give them a boost if needed.

Water & Mulch

Throughout the growing season, make sure your pepper plants receive adequate watering. Deep watering every three to four days is better than a short water every day. Check the peppers often during periods of extreme heat and drought. Often the top layer of soil will be dry but when you stick a finger down into the soil it will be wet an inch below the surface. The trick is to maintain adequate water

without drowning a plant or drying it out. You can use mulch to prevent excessive evaporation from the soil during the dry summer months. Doing this will help retain soil moisture and moderate the soil temperature. But do this only after your soil has warmed—mulching cool soil will keep it too cool and stunt the pepper plants' growth. Water in moderation. **Do Not Overwater!** Peppers are thirsty plants! They need a moderate supply of water from the moment they sprout until the end of the season. However, peppers won't tolerate a saturated soil that waterlogs their roots. The soil must drain well yet hold enough moisture to keep the plants in production.

Pinch Off First Flowers and use Companion Plants

As difficult as it might be for you (and me), pinch off any early blossoms that appear on pepper plants. This won't harm the plants. It helps them direct their energy into growing and results in lots of large fruits later in the season instead of just a few small fruits early on. Spray Neem Oil on the underside of the leaves to help control our favorite pests, white flies. Basil: Arguably one of the most popular summer herbs, basil is great on its own, but also has a place next to and around pepper plants. It's claimed that growing basil next to peppers boosts their flavor, and may help to repel some common garden pests, such as aphids, spider mites, thrips, mosquitoes, and flies. Plus, you get pesto!

Harvest

You can harvest the peppers at their immature green or purple stage, but the flavor will be sweeter if you wait for them to turn their mature color—usually red, but sometimes golden yellow or orange. Italian fryers and jalapenos, are possible exceptions: Many people prefer the flavor of these peppers when they are full size but still green. To harvest the peppers, cut them off with hand pruners. Pulling them off by hand can damage the plant. Now get ready to enjoy your stuffed peppers as well as sausage, onion and pepper sandwiches.... yummy!