

Growing Peppers

Peppers are a warm-season crop that come in a variety of colors, shapes, sizes, and flavors from hot to sweet.



Selecting and Preparing a Site

Select a space that receives full sun and has well-draining soil. A balance between sandy and loamy soil is ideal. Add compost to the soil before planting. Like eggplants, tomatoes, and potatoes, peppers are a member of the nightshade family. Avoid growing peppers in areas where these other nightshades have recently grown.

Peppers grow best in soil with a pH between 6.2 and 6.8. Soil testing is recommended. Add fertilizer and lime as directed by soil test results. Add compost to the soil prior to fertilizing.



Planting

Peppers have a long growing season (60 to 90 days) so it is advantageous to either start seeds indoors or buy transplants to plant outdoors instead of sowing seeds outdoors. If starting seeds indoors, begin 8–10 weeks before you plan to transplant outside. Plant seeds $\frac{1}{4}$ inch deep, three to a pot filled with potting mix. For best results, maintain the soil at 70°F by keeping them in a warm location or by using an external heat source such as a heat mat. When the first leaves appear, move them to a sunny location or under grow lights. Keep the lights on for sixteen hours per day during the entire growing period. Thin out the weakest seedling letting the remaining two pepper plants in each pot grow as one. When all danger of frost has passed, harden off the plants by placing them outside in the sun for a few hours each day.

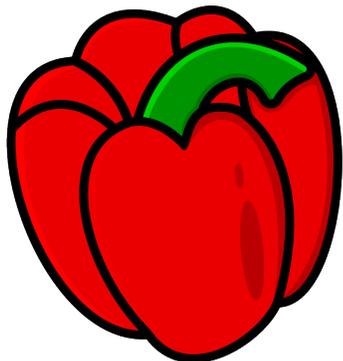
If purchasing starter plants, look for ones that are 6 to 9 inches tall with straight, sturdy stems, 4 to 6 leaves, and no blooms or fruit.

Plant peppers outside in late May in the warmer regions of Pennsylvania and early June in cooler areas. Transplant into moist soil at a depth of 4 inches in the evening or on a cool, cloudy day, and shade the plants for a day or two to prevent wilting which may occur in direct sunlight. Press soil firmly around the roots. Allow 1 to 1½ feet between plants and, if planting multiple rows, allow 1½ to 3 feet between rows. Water the plants after planting.



Caring for the Site

Bell and sweet peppers need regular, slow, deep watering. They should be allowed to almost dry out between waterings. However, do not allow the plants to wilt as this will reduce the yield and quality of the peppers. Hot peppers are very drought-tolerant but benefit from watering when first planted. Apply mulch to maintain moisture and deter weeds. Apply a balanced fertilizer when they start blooming and again four weeks later. Weed carefully around the plants.





Harvesting

Refer to the seed packet or plant tag to learn when peppers should be ready to harvest. Some red bell peppers are green when they are immature and later turn red, while others never turn red. When peppers reach their full size and color, they are ready for harvesting. Use a sharp knife or scissors to cut peppers off the plant. Wear gloves when harvesting hot peppers. Regular picking encourages plants to continue to produce peppers..



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