

How to grow

Chilli Peppers or Capsicums

Chilli Peppers are from the genus *Capsicum* which are members of the nightshade family SOLANACEAE and are cultivated for their pungency.

Other varieties of *Capsicum* are bell peppers (in the UK peppers) but whilst chilli peppers are spicy, bell peppers generally are not and provide additional sweetness to flavour a meal rather than "heat".

Chilli peppers are believed to have originated in Central or South America and cultivated in Mexico.

Chillies contain CAPSAICIN a compound that probably accounts for their many health benefits including weight loss, pain relief, improved heart health and lower ulcer risk. However chillies can cause temporary burning sensations in the mouth for some and have uncomfortable intestinal side effects for others. Too many can irritate the stomach lining. They are however packed full of vitamin C

Sowing Seeds indoors.

Chillies are easy to grow in pots in the greenhouse/polytunnel or windowsill. Sow seeds from late winter to mid spring - January to March. The earlier the start the earlier and longer the harvest.

Fill a small pot with seed compost and sow a few seeds on top. Cover with a layer of vermiculite and water. (As most seeds will germinate only sow what you need). Seeds germinate quickly - between 14 & 21 days - in a propagator 21C (70F) or on a sunny windowsill with a clear plastic bag over pots to raise the humidity.

Once the seedlings appear remove from the propagator and remove plastic bags. Keep the plants at 16-18C (60-64F) in good light and water regularly.

When the seedlings are 25cm (1inch) tall prick out each into it's own pot filled with multi-purpose compost - 8cm (3inch) pots. Pot on into larger 15cm (6inch) pots as plants begin to grow.

When plants reach about 20cm (8inches) tall they could possibly require a thin cane to hold them firm. Pinch out when plants are 30cm (1foot) tall to encourage bushy plants and hopefully produce more fruits. Mist the plants with water when the flowers appear as this helps the fruit to set and discourages red spider mite.

Planting Outside

Chillies need to be planted in the warmest, sunniest spot possible to produce a good crop outdoors. The soil needs to be a well-drained, fertile, water retentive soil that is slightly acid. Therefore you need a moderate amount of well-rotted compost dug into the ground before planting. Do not use fresh manure or too large a quantity as this will cause leafy growth at the expense of the fruits. Warm the soil with cloches 2 weeks ahead of planting and ensure that plants are hardened off and that the last frosts have gone.

In late May/early June move plants into a final 22ch (9inch) pot or plant 3 to a standard growing bag. Space plants 38-45cm (15-18inches) apart depending on the variety. Dwarf varieties only need only need to be spaced 30cm (1foot) apart.

Water little and often to keep the soil evenly moist. Mulch the soil surface to retain moisture. Take care that plants don't dry out as chillies can suffer from blossom end rot. ******(See pests and remedies below |). When watering the plants it is best to water twice a day in hot weather rather than once a day with double volume. Cover plants with fleece or cloches at least until the end of June to protect your plants from the wind.

Planting in the Greenhouse/polytunnel

Space plants as above, however in the greenhouse/polytunnel you will need to maintain a humid atmosphere by damping down at least twice a day in hot weather.

Feed plants with a high potassium fertiliser such as tomato feed on a weekly basis once flowers begin to appear.

Staking may be needed for larger plants and for those in growing bags. It is best to use several canes per plant as stems are brittle.

Harvesting

Chillies are usually ready for harvesting from mid-summer to the autumn if grown in the greenhouse. Fruiting outdoors should begin by August.

Pick fruits when they are green to encourage further cropping. Chillies left on the plant will change colour and become hotter. However, when fruit is left on the plant new flowers are not formed and this leads to a reduction in the overall harvest which could be up to 25% or more, but many feel that a smaller harvest of mature fruit is more worthwhile.

At the end of the season chillies can be harvested and used in pickles and sauces. They can also be kept for up to a year if dried. To dry - tie or string the chillies in open

bunches and hang them in an airy, warm dry place - the airing cupboard is ideal. When dry they can be used as flakes in cooking. Chillies can also be frozen.

****Care** needs to be taken when preparing chillies as the capsaicin will get on your fingers. Wash your hands thoroughly after dealing with them and take great care NOT to touch your eyes or face as the chemical will burn and be extremely painful.

Pests and Remedies

Blossom End Rot is the result of a calcium (Ca) deficiency. The symptoms begin as a light green or yellow sunken spot and expands to a larger, collapsed area that begins to turn black.

Remedy: Remove affected fruits immediately to prevent the plant wasting energy on them. There is no treatment only prevention of this problem. Never let the soil or compost dry out especially when the fruit is swelling.

Red Spider Mite. Leaves become mottled, pale and covered in webbing on which the mites can be clearly seen. Leaves will drop prematurely.

Remedy: Mist plants regularly. Use biological control in the greenhouse.

Aphids: Look for colonies of **greenfly** on the soft shoot tips of plants or on the leaves. Greenfly suck sap and excrete sticky honeydew, encouraging black, sooty mould on plants.

Whitefly have the same effect as greenfly. The remedy is as below and use sticky traps in the greenhouse.

Remedy: Squash between finger and thumb . Use a biological control.

Grey Mould: Botrytis is a common disease especially in damp, humid conditions. Spores enter the plants via damaged tissue, wounds or open flowers. These spores if not removed can survive over winter.

Remedy: Remove damaged plant parts before they become infected. Cut out infected areas and clear away all debris. In the greenhouse reduce humidity.

Growing for our Annual Show: Chilli Peppers need to be fresh, brightly coloured, yellow or red fruits with colour according to the cultivar.

Refs: www.rhs-org.uk/chillipeppers/grow-your-own

www.allotment-garden.org/vegetables/chillipepper-growing

