

How to grow

Bell Peppers or Capsicums

Bell Peppers or Sweet Peppers in the UK are a member of the chilli pepper family tho' without their heat and spiciness. They can be eaten cooked or raw.

Bell peppers are the fruit of a flowering plant in the botanical family SOLANACEAE. They are formed of 3 or 4 lobes and are mostly hollow, with a bulbous placenta and numerous flat, small, white seeds. They are treated as a vegetable in cooking but are technically fruits as they are part of the plant that contains its seeds. They have this in common with other fruits that are used as vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini and string beans.

While as the same species (*Capsicum Annuum*) as chillies like jalapeños and cayenne peppers they lack the compound CAPSAICIN which is what causes the sensation of heat. Ripe red peppers are dried and ground into a powder to produce the spice Paprika.

Green peppers have a slightly bitter flavour with a crunchy, juicy texture, while the ripe red ones are sweeter and more fruity. Orange and yellow peppers are likewise sweeter than the green.

These are tender plants best grown in a greenhouse as they require warm conditions but can be grown outdoors in a sheltered, sunny spot in containers or in the ground.

Growing seeds indoors

Sow indoors from mid-February to early March for those plants to be grown under glass. Sow in late March - early April for those plants to be grown outdoors.

Sow in small pots or a seed tray with a moist seed compost and cover with a thin layer of vermiculite. Most seeds will germinate within 14-21 days, so only sow a few extra in case of losses. The time between sowing and picking is approximately 18 weeks.

Place in a heated propagator 18-21C (65-70F) or on a warm windowsill and cover pots with a clear plastic bag to keep the warmth and moisture in. Once seedlings appear remove from propagator or remove plastic bags. Keep plants at 16-18C (60-64F) in a good light. Water regularly.

Transplant seedlings into their own pots 7.5-9cm (3-3.5inch) pots once they have 2 true leaves. Maintain a high temperature to encourage growth. Each plant will eventually need a 30cm (12inch) pot, filled with good quality potting compost. Plants can also be grown in grow bags - 2 to 3 plants per bag, directly into the ground or greenhouse border.

Planting outside.

Before planting outside choose your warmest, sunniest spot. Peppers like a fertile, well-drained but moisture retentive soil that is slightly acid therefore dig in well rotted manure - 5.4kg (10lb) per square-metre/yard. Do not use fresh manure as this will promote leafy growth at the expense of your fruit.

Move plants into their final container in late May/June if growing outside. Plants are tender therefore don't take them outside until frosts are gone, and before planting out harden plants off for 2-3 weeks. 2 weeks before planting outside the ground needs to be warmed with polythene or cloches .

Plant your peppers 38-45cm (15-18inches) apart. Cover with fleece or cloches to protect the young plants until approximately the end of June. To ensure all risk of frosts are gone.

Water little and often - keeping soil or compost evenly moist. Irregular watering leads to blossom end rot. (See under Problems & remedies below). If possible mulch the soil to help retain moisture. Staking plants is recommended as they can reach 60cm (3foot) high and the weight of fruit can damage stalks. Pinch out growing tips when plants are approximately 20cm (8inches) tall to encourage branching and hopefully provide more fruit.

Planting in the greenhouse.

If growing your peppers in a heated greenhouse, move them into their final containers in late April. They can if preferred, be planted directly into the greenhouse border. Again staking of plants is recommended (as above). Pinch out growing tips as above.

Keep humidity high in the greenhouse by damping down twice a day in hot weather and keep your greenhouse well ventilated as temperatures above 30C (86F) can reduce cropping. Again water little and often to prevent soil drying out.

To encourage fruit to set and discourage red spider-mite, mist plants with water when flowers appear and also once the flowers appear feed with a tomato fertiliser.

Harvesting

In the greenhouse fruits can be harvested from mid-summer (July) into the autumn. Outdoor fruits are ready for picking from August but will finish fruiting earlier as temperatures drop.

Pick when fruits are swollen and glossy. Most peppers ripen from green to red but other colours i.e yellow or orange are available. Harvest at the state of maturity you prefer,

but the longer the fruit is left on the plant to ripen the development of the other fruits will be delayed/hindered.

Pests and remedies.

Red spider-mite/Two spotted mite. The leaves of the plant become mottled, pale and covered in webbing, on which the mites can be clearly seen. Leaves also drop prematurely.

Remedy. These pests thrive in hot, dry conditions, so mist plants regularly and in the greenhouse use a biological control.

Aphids. Look for colonies of greenfly on soft, shoot tips of plant or on leaves. These pests suck sap and excrete sticky honeydew, thus encouraging the growth of black, sooty mould on plants.

Remedy. Use finger and thumb to squash aphid colonies and use biological controls in the greenhouse.

Blossom End Rot. Dark blotches will appear on the ends of fruit.

Remedy. Water regularly and do not allow the soil to dry out.

Whitefly. These small, white flies harm the plants in the same ways as do the greenfly (above).

Remedy. Use biological controls or sticky traps in the greenhouse.

Growing for our Annual Show.

Capsicums - sweet peppers should be fresh, brightly coloured, yellow or red fruits according to the cultivar.

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

www.allotment-garden.org/vegetable/bellpepper-growing.