

### Planning for a Peck of Peppers

If you think your pepper choices are limited to bell peppers and jalapenos, think again. There are hundreds of pepper cultivars grown today. It is safe to say there is a pepper suitable for every need, from eating fresh in a salad, to quick cooking in a stir-fry, to slow cooking in a stew, or to roasting on the grill. There are sweet peppers, mild peppers, hot peppers, and lots of very flavorful peppers. So whether you call it pepper, chile, or capsicum, plan on planting some in your garden this year.

The pepper plant belongs to the genus *Capsicum*. Although the classification of the species within this genus has often changed, there are five basic domesticated species: *Capsicum annuum* includes most of the common varieties like bell, wax, and jalapeno; *Capsicum baccatum* includes the South American aji pepper; *Capsicum chinense* includes the very hot habaneros; *Capsicum frutescens* includes the tabasco pepper; and *Capsicum pubescens* includes the South American rocotos.

Peppers originated in South America and were harvested in the wild dating back ten thousand years. Archaeological studies have shown that peppers were domesticated by at least 3300 BC. A wild pepper called the chiltepin (of the *annuum* species) gradually migrated north from Mexico and still grows wild in Arizona and south Texas. It is not known when cultivated peppers were introduced to the United States, but at least by the 1700s, peppers were grown in various parts of the country.

Luckily, those of us in the northwest have a wonderful pepper-growing climate with long and warm summer days. If you start with healthy seedlings and provide the right environment, you should have a bumper crop of peppers. We are also lucky here in the northwest that many local nurseries carry a good variety of pepper seedlings in the spring. However, you can dramatically increase the variety of peppers you grow if you start from seeds. But you better get started now!

First you need to acquire some catalogs – some pepper seed resources are listed later in this article. Then spend a few wintry nights leafing through the catalogs and send in your order (and if you're like most of us, you'll need to cut the order in half or double the size of the garden). It is best to place your order in January while supplies are still plentiful and to make sure the seeds arrive in time for planting. The catalogs will list the number of days to maturity. Think of this as the time from when you transplant to the garden. In the northwest, do not select a variety that requires more than 90–100 days. This is not a big limitation since there are few varieties that require longer than 100 days to mature.



Clockwise from top – Giant Marconi, Fooled You (Jalapeno hybrid), Sweet Banana Supreme, Ancho Villa, NuMex Big Jim, Garden Salsa, Serrano, Cubanelle, Italian Roaster, and Cherry Pick in the center.

Now you need to decide when to start the seeds; working backwards is the best way to approach this. Seeds should be started about 8–10 weeks before you want to put the plants in the garden. The general rule of thumb for the northwest is to transplant peppers to the garden around Memorial Day. Therefore, the seeds should be started no later than mid-March.

Plant the seeds in a sterile seed-starting mix in a well-draining container at least one inch apart. Don't forget to label the plants. Pepper seeds need warm soil (80°–90°F) to germinate. The best option is an electric propagation mat, but the top of a water heater or refrigerator can also work. The soil must be kept evenly moist, but not soggy. Pepper seeds can take up to two weeks to germinate, so be patient.

As soon as the seedlings start to emerge, they need full light. So if you are using the water heater, you will need to move the seedlings to a bright location once they emerge. A heated greenhouse or sunroom is optimal, fluorescent lights suspended above the plants is also effective, and even a very sunny windowsill can work in a pinch. If using a windowsill, check the nighttime temperature and protect the plants at night if necessary. You will also need to rotate the plants since they will bend toward the light. Insufficient light will result in pale and weak spindly plants that may not survive wind in the garden.

Once the plants have two sets of leaves, they need to be transplanted to individual containers. Use a 4–5" container to ensure ample room for roots to develop and to avoid the need to transplant again later. Use a sterile potting mix to avoid damping-off disease and transplant with care to avoid damaging the roots. At this point, start fertilizing the plants lightly about once a week. Be careful not to burn the plants with too much fertilizer. If the plants start to yellow or look pale, it is an indication of not enough nutrients. Be aware, however, that different cultivars of peppers have leaves with varying shades of green, so just because one variety is a lighter green than another, does not necessarily mean a lack of fertilizer.

Peppers should not be transplanted to the garden until the nighttime temperatures are above 55°F. Fruit will not set at temperatures below this, so there is nothing to be gained by planting them in the garden too early. About a week or two before transplanting to the garden, the plants must be "hardened off" to get them used to sun and wind. Start by putting the plants outside for a few hours in a wind and sun protected area. Gradually increase the time and gradually introduce the plants to wind and sun. Warning: slugs think of tender young pepper plants as caviar and they will find them sitting on the patio in their pots, so start baiting at this point.

Now that you have hardened off the plants and the temperatures are warm enough, move the plants into the garden. Select a site with well-draining soil and at least 6–10 hours of sun. Put a short stake in the ground next to each plant since they often need support as they develop fruit. Continue baiting for slugs and protect against cutworms. Mulch around the plants (compost works great for this) and fertilize as needed. Avoid too much fertilizer since this can result in excess foliage and little fruit. Pepper plants also need regular water so never let the soil dry out completely. On the other hand, do not keep the soil soggy. Use a moisture meter (or the handy finger) to determine when the soil is dry a few inches below the surface. That is where the roots are and where the moisture is needed.

If you end up with more peppers than you can eat during the growing season, they are extremely easy to preserve. Cut off the stem, cut the pepper in half, remove the seeds, place in a freezer container (ziploc bags work well), and freeze. Whenever you need a pepper for cooking, simply pull out as many as needed, thaw slightly, and chop. They will keep in the freezer until next year's crop is available. Hot peppers can be dried and

ground for use on pizza or in stews. Many varieties can also be roasted, peeled, and then frozen. Simply blister uniformly over a grill, in a heavy frying pan, or even under the broiler. Put into a sealed bag to sweat until they cool slightly (15–30 minutes), then pull off the skin. Whole roasted peppers are delicious stuffed, and there is no meal more satisfying on a cold winter night than roasted green chile stew. Roasting green chiles is such a tradition in New Mexico that gas-fired tumbling roasters are set up in front of supermarkets and along city streets. Within a few minutes, customers can drive away with 40-pound sacks of roasted chiles – just imagine how hungry one must feel after smelling that wonderful aroma all the way home.

It is hard to find a pepper that isn't good, but here is an attempt to recommend a few. Many of these listed varieties have several hybrids, so for instance, you may find several types of Ancho pepper.

- Sweet Banana – yellow to red, great raw or cooked
- Cubanelle – yellow-green, frying type
- Giant Aconcagua – light green to red, sweet and huge
- Gypsy – yellow to red, 1981 All-America Selections winner
- Valencia Hybrid – very sweet bell pepper, turns orange in 90 days
- Ancho – dark green, traditionally used for chiles rellenos
- Big Chile – Anaheim-type, great roasted or cooked
- Garden Salsa – medium-hot pepper, great for salsa
- Habanero – very very hot, orange wrinkled fruits, preserve in vinegar or vodka for display
- Hungarian Wax – yellow to red medium-hot pepper
- Italian Roaster – long thin green peppers, excellent roasted and peeled
- NuMex Big Jim – famous New Mexico variety, great roasted
- Purple Jalapeno – dark purple, jalapeno flavor
- Tam Jalapeno – a lot less heat than a standard jalapeno



Ancho Villa



Sweet Pickle



Valencia Bell



Italian Roaster



Cubanelle



Garden Salsa

## Resources for Pepper Seeds

The Pepper Gal

P.O. Box 23006

Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33307-3006

Tel: 954-537-5540

Fax: 954-566-2208

Email: [peppergal@mindspring.com](mailto:peppergal@mindspring.com)

[Offers over 300 varieties of pepper seeds]

Tomato Growers Supply Company

P.O. Box 2237

Fort Myers, FL 33902

Tel: 888-478-7333

Fax: 888-768-3476

[www.tomatogrowers.com](http://www.tomatogrowers.com)

[Offers about 150 varieties of pepper seeds]

Territorial Seed Company

P.O. Box 158

Cottage Grove, OR 97424-0061

Tel: 541-942-9547

Fax: 888-657-3131

[www.territorialseed.com](http://www.territorialseed.com)

Shepherd's Garden Seeds  
30 Irene Street  
Torrington, CT 06790-6658  
Tel: 860-482-3638  
[www.shepherdseeds.com](http://www.shepherdseeds.com)

Chile Pepper Institute  
Box 30003, MSC3Q  
Las Cruces, NM 88003  
Tel: 505-646-3028  
[www.chilepepperinstitute.org](http://www.chilepepperinstitute.org)

Burpee  
Warminster, PA 18974  
Tel: 800-888-1447  
Fax: 800-487-5530  
[www.burpee.com](http://www.burpee.com)

## Resources for Information on Peppers

[Chile Pepper Institute](#) – This web site is sponsored by the University of New Mexico. It includes information on diseases and disorders of pepper plants, nutritional value of peppers, the anatomy of a pepper, and much more. These folks really study peppers and virtually invented the New Mexico green chile.

[Hortsense](#) – This web site is provided by Washington State University and includes information on how to combat disease and insect problems with pepper plants.

*The Pepper Garden*, Dave DeWitt and Paul W. Bosland, 10 Speed Press, Berkeley, California, 1993, ISBN 0-89815-554-1. This informative book describes many of the different types of peppers and how to grow them.

*Peppers*, Jean Andrews, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1995, ISBN 0-292-70467-4. This book is the classic source for the history and dispersion, biology, and taxonomy, cultivation, and medicinal, economic, and gastronomic uses of peppers. Also includes 34 beautiful color illustrations of pepper plants.

*Beginning with Chiles*, Mary Lou Creechan and Jim Creechan, Tiengui del Norte Publishing, Edmonton, Canada, 1999, ISBN 0-9685066-0-7. This is a cookbook for those just learning how to use chiles. It explains how to roast, peel and prepare chiles for all uses.

*The Green Chile Bible*, award winning New Mexico recipes compiled by The Albuquerque Tribune, published by Clear Light Publishers, Santa Fe, New Mexico, ISBN 0-940666-35-9. Chiles in your breakfast biscuits? You'll find that and more standard recipes here.