



Peppers – Pick a Peck

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Sweet peppers are a favorite summer vegetable that is flavorful, easy to grow and nutritious. Those just used to the few varieties offered in grocery stores will be amazed at the selections available from seed catalogs. Pinetree Garden Seeds has 28 sweet peppers and Totally Tomatoes (they do have more than just tomatoes) offers about 75 various kinds of sweet peppers including bells, Italian frying, paprikas, cheese peppers and miniatures plus a huge number of hot peppers as well.



Photo by dmp, 2011

One of my favorite sweet bell peppers is ‘King of the North’. It is very reliable and produces 4 by 6-inch peppers that mature to red in only 70 days or so and are great for stuffing. This year I am also growing two other reds, ‘Takii’s New Ace’ and ‘Big Red’ along with a yellow called ‘Early Summer Hybrid’. Try a new variety each year to find your favorite.

While all sweet peppers are loaded with vitamins A and C, supply moderate amounts of potassium and folic acid and are low in calories, red peppers have one and a half times as much vitamin C as the green ones. Keep in mind that most peppers, except the chocolate, purple and white ones, start off as green and change to red, orange, or yellow as they mature.

Peppers are in the nightshade (Solanaceae) family along with tomatoes, eggplants and potatoes so keep that in mind when rotating your crops. They have been cultivated for thousands of years and are native to South and Central America. Columbus brought peppers back to Spain where they spread throughout Europe and Asia. A Hungarian developed the first mild bell pepper in the 1920s. Most of the peppers we purchase in the grocery store are grown in Texas, Florida or California according to the USDA.

Even the earliest peppers don't ripen much quicker than 60 days from transplanting out so unless you started seeds back in March, your only option for planting now is purchasing transplants. Fortunately, most local garden centers and farm stores still seem to have a good selection of peppers available.

Look for healthy plants with straight, sturdy stems. Ideal cell pack transplants have 6 to 8 leaves and are not setting flowers yet. Plants may be larger if sold in bigger individual pots. I will often gently pop out a plant from its cell pack to make sure that it is not terribly rootbound and try to select ones with white, healthy roots.

Like most of our vegetables, peppers do best in a deep, moderately fertile soil with a pH in the mid 6s. They really can't tolerate wet feet so make sure your site is well-drained. Also, do not overfertilize peppers with nitrogen. We get many calls at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center about beautiful plants that are huge with lots of leaves and few, if any, peppers. Usually this is due to overfertilization with nitrogen. So be sure to follow either recommendations from your soil test or the directions on the fertilizer package.

Plants are generally set 12 to 18 inches apart in rows about 2 to 3 feet apart depending on the size of the mature plants. Pick a cloudy day to set your plants in the garden. Water well and keep the plants evenly moist. The taller types might benefit from having a tomato cage placed over them.

Sweet peppers can be harvested green or left on the plant to ripen to red or whatever color variety you planted. Use clippers or a knife when harvesting peppers as it is easy to pull off a stem or two if just trying to twist them off.

Even though a close relative to tomatoes, peppers seem to have a lot fewer pest problems. Sometimes blossom end rot occurs if the soil is lacking calcium or if watering is inconsistent. Occasionally those European corn borers get into the fruit and during really wet or humid years, you might see some leaf spots or anthracnose.

Enjoy your homegrown peppers fresh in salads, grilled or fried. Any way you serve them, they are delicious and good for you. If you have questions about growing peppers, or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.