

Peppers

By Botanical Interests

Now's the time to start thinking about sowing peppers indoors! Whether you like the heat or like them sweet, peppers are a kitchen staple.

Temperature is crucial for starting peppers. Pepper seeds germinate much faster if the soil/media is kept at 70°-90°F. At cooler temperatures, they can either fail to sprout, or sprouting may take a month. The longer seeds take to emerge, the more susceptible they are to rotting in the wet conditions or being attacked by fungus in the media. Seedling heat mats are especially helpful in maintaining warm soil for peppers. Once germinated, peppers can be grown at air temperatures of 60°F at night and 70°F during the day.

Peppers are very frost sensitive, so wait to harden off until outdoors temperatures are frost-free and settled. Soil should be over 55°F when peppers are transplanted. If your spring warm-up is lagging, use plastic mulch or season extension products like hot caps or walls of water to warm the soil.

Peppers do not set fruit in periods of extended cool temperature (below 55°F) or hot (over 90°F daytime and over 75°F nighttime) temperatures. Fertilizing with kelp or seaweed can help plants with stress from heat, drought, or transplanting.

What makes peppers hot?

A class of compounds called capsaicin (derived from peppers' genus name) gives chile peppers their spiciness. Capsaicin occurs mostly in the light-colored ribs (also called pith) inside the pepper. The seeds contain very little or no capsaicin, but are often hot because they come in contact with the capsaicin from the ribs. Capsaicin may have several health benefits. Some of the possibilities being studied are increased metabolism, appetite suppression, decreased heart disease, reduced pain perception, and heartburn relief (believe it or not!). Like your peppers hot? The more mature the pepper fruit, the hotter the pepper will be. Stress, such as drought, will also make peppers hotter. You can cause stress to the plant by cutting back on watering after fruits have started to develop so the soil stays dry, but be careful not to let the plant wilt! However, drought stress may reduce yields.