



Swan River Gardens

How to Grow Peppers

Whether you are talking about sweet peppers or hot peppers, it seems everyone has a favorite they cannot cook without. For some cooks sweet peppers are an indispensable ingredient while hot peppers are the foundation for whole types of cuisines! And since they are truly one of the easiest garden vegetables to grow everyone should find a spot for a plant or two each season. They are excellent choices for container plants and provide a steady harvest all summer.

Start With: Because of Montana's short growing season we typically start peppers from plants not seeds. Swan River Gardens offers many varieties of plants ready to go in the ground. If you want to try an even wider range of varieties however, seeds are very easy to grow and good starter plants can be grown on a windowsill. Be sure to follow the seed package directions and find a sunny spot. You can grow pepper plants in as little as 4 inch pots. They will live happily in those until they can be planted outside.

Hot pepper plants can be quite prolific, with one plant producing many peppers, sometimes hundreds! Sweet peppers tend to produce much less and you will need 1-2 plants per person in the household for fresh eating, 4-6 plants each for preserving.

Planting Time: Because peppers are not frost hardy, you must wait until all danger of frost is past before planting outside. Once you have planted them, watch out for nights with temperatures dropping below 45°f. You may need to still protect small plants but a bucket turned over them is fine; just be sure to remove it during the day. Once summer temperatures really arrive you can stop worrying about your plants.

Spacing: Pepper plants are compact and sturdy. They typically grow like a small bush and rarely reach more than 2 feet high or wide. Peppers are very good choices for growing in pots. They do not need staking as a rule but a plant heavily laden with big sweet peppers may need some support to avoid breaking branches. Tomato cages work great for this purpose.

Growing Season Needs: Peppers are native to mostly dry climates so they do not like to be overwatered. For hot peppers, many gardeners believe that withholding water increases capsaicin production and makes for hotter peppers. Peppers will wilt when they need water and sweet peppers will have a better flavor if they receive regular water and are not allowed to dry out.

Harvest Time: Harvest peppers as they ripen to encourage further production. Some peppers are ripe when they are green and some need to turn red, orange or yellow. Be sure you understand when your crop is ripe! Many hot peppers dry really well and can be strung together to dry. Sweet peppers are great to freeze. Cut them to size, spread the pieces on a cookie sheet and freeze them before you bag them so they will separate easily when you want them later.