



Seed Savers EXCHANGE

How to Grow Peppers (*Capsicum spp.*)

*Both sweet and hot peppers originate from one wild species native to Central and South America. Of today's five domesticated pepper species, gardeners usually encounter two: *Capsicum annuum* and *Capsicum chinense*. All species grow well throughout the United States as long as they receive enough sun, heat, and moisture.*

When/How to Start Indoors: Peppers germinate and grow best when soil temperatures are above 75°F. In most regions of the country, peppers should be started indoors and then transplanted outdoors as the weather warms. Sow peppers indoors 6-8 weeks before transplanting. Plant seeds at a depth of ¼ inch and make sure the soil remains warm throughout the germination period.

Time to Germination: The germination period typically lasts 14-18 days.

When to Transplant: Move pepper seedlings outdoors 4-6 weeks after the last frost, being sure they are hardened off (or gradually introduced to the direct sunlight, dry air, and cold nights).

Spacing Requirements: Plant seedlings 12-24 inches apart in the garden in rows at least 12 inches apart.

Special Considerations: Most sweet peppers mature in 60-90 days; hot peppers can take up to 150 days.

Common Pests and Diseases (and how to manage): Peppers can be susceptible to diseases such as bacterial spot, anthracnose, blossom end rot, sunscald, and pepper mild mottle virus. Prevent disease by rotating crops regularly and not overcrowding plants.

Harvest (when and how): Maturity in peppers is indicated by a color change in the fruit. Green peppers are harvested as immature fruits. Most varieties will ripen to yellow, orange, red, brown, or purple when they are fully ripe. Harvest with scissors or pruning shears.

Eating: Peppers are one of the most versatile culinary crops grown in the home garden. They can be eaten fresh, fried, roasted, stewed, stir fried, pickled, as well as puréed into soups, dips, and pestos. Peppers, especially thin fleshed varieties, can be braided into a decorative ristra, air dried, and then crushed to make pepper flakes, chili powder, or paprika.

Storing: When stored at room temperature, peppers have a shelf life of 1-2 weeks. Preserved peppers, when pickled or stored in oil, can last for many months. Dried peppers will keep almost indefinitely.

How to Save Pepper Seeds

When saving seeds from peppers, remember that different species occasionally cross-pollinate so be sure to isolate varieties as recommended.

Life Cycle: Pepper is an annual crop. It will complete its full life cycle—including germination, reproduction, and death—in one growing season.

Recommended Isolation Distance: When saving seeds from pepper, separate varieties by 300 to 1,600 feet or hand pollinate several fruits using blossom bags.

Recommended Population Sizes: A single pepper plant can produce viable seed. However, to maintain a variety's diversity over time, save seeds from 5 to 20 pepper plants.

Assessing Seed Maturity: Fruits are mature when they begin to soften. If frost threatens before the peppers mature, pull entire plant and hang in cool, dry location until they do mature.

Harvesting: Harvest fruits up to two weeks past edible stage. Cut around the top of the pepper and use the stem as a handle to twist out the core. Use the tip of a knife to flick out the seeds; rinse and dry seeds. Be careful when processing the fruits of hot peppers as the oils and vapors of capsaicin can cause eye, skin, and respiratory irritation. Work in a well-ventilated area and take care to wear protective gloves and a respirator or dust mask to prevent irritation. Avoid touching your eyes or nose as you work. If you handle hot peppers bare-handed, immediately scrub hands with soap and warm water.

Cleaning and Processing: Allow seeds to air-dry on newsprint, coffee filters, or screens for several days. When a test seed can be cleanly snapped in half, seeds are dry enough for storage.

Storage and Viability: Store seeds in a cool, dry place for up to three years.

**For more seed saving and gardening tips, visit:
seedsavers.org/learn**