



Master Gardeners Santa Clara County

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Growing Great Peppers and Chiles

Seedling care

Peppers and chiles like warm weather and warm soil. So it's best to keep your new seedlings in a sheltered spot until our nighttime temperatures are consistently 55 F or above.

Consider transplanting them into larger containers. It will let their roots develop and the larger pots won't dry out as easily.

Water them frequently, every other day if they're in the sun. If the pots ever dry out, soak them in a bucket of water to make sure the potting soil gets thoroughly rewetted. Dry potting soil will shed water without absorbing it., so it can look like it's wet when it's not. A truly wet pot will be heavy; a dry pot will be light.

Check the seedlings regularly to see if any snails or aphids have found them. Hand-pick the snails. Aphids are soft-bodied insects that can easily be squished with your fingers or washed off with a hard spray of water. For a bad infestation, you can use insecticidal soap, but it's seldom necessary.

Planting out

When you're ready to plant your seedlings, soak them in a bucket of water to make sure the root ball is thoroughly wet. Remove them from the pot, handling them gently. If the plant is rootbound (when you take it out, you see a tight mass of white roots), gently tear them apart a bit or score the rootball with a knife.

Space them 10 to 12 inches apart, with the rootball just below the surface or bury up to 1/3 of the stem. Planting closely helps them support and shade each other. For large-podded peppers, planting two seedlings in the same hole helps protect the pods from sunburn because there will be more leaves. You'll get more peppers per square foot, plus they'll support each other and will look lush and beautiful. Sunburn isn't as much of a problem for small-podded chiles, so just plant them one per hole. For best production from large-podded peppers, pick off all flowers and fruit for 4-6 weeks after planting, so the plant can grow deeper roots and more foliage before setting fruit.

Water them in immediately so the soil settles around the new plants. Mark the plants clearly.

Watering and mulch

Drip irrigation and soaker hoses are great for watering throughout the season. But for the first few weeks, water your seedlings with a hose until they get settled in and their roots start growing. For fast-growing hybrids like NuMex chiles, continue top watering for an extra two weeks.

If your drip irrigation is on a timer, be sure to adjust it as the weather changes, less when it's cool, more when it's hot. Use a moisture meter to check the soil moisture. Mulching the plants with compost, straw, or other mulch will conserve water and keep the soil evenly moist. For hotter chiles than normal, stress them by only watering them once a week and letting them get dry in between. This will cause them to produce hotter pods.

Fertilizing and staking

Peppers and chiles need nitrogen for leaf growth and sun protection of pods. Fertilize the plants about once a month with an organic fertilizer like Dr. Earth for Vegetables. Place the fertilizer about four inches from the stem of the plant (this is known as side dressing). In August you could increase it to every two weeks. Consider adding potassium the first month for fast growing varieties.

Larger plants may need to be tied to stakes, especially as heavy pods start to develop. Small tomato cages can also be used for support.

Picking

Be sure to pick the pods at the right color for that variety. The color to pick at is listed on the Peppers/Chile handout. Some are best green and small (e.g. Pimiento de Padron). Some are good either green or with color (e.g. NuMex, jalapeño, serrano). Some should be picked only after they color up (e.g. many sweets, Thai, etc).

Saving seeds

Many peppers and chiles are likely to cross pollinate and produce impure seed. If you want to save seeds from your plants, contact the Master Gardener Hotline (408-282-3105, M-F, 9:30-12:30, or 650-329-1356 on Friday, 1-4) for advice.