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Dennis Hinkamp
Utah State University

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GARDEN NOTES

PEPPERS - IT PAYS TO PROCRASTINATE

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Practice your procrastination skills by waiting to plant peppers until the soil is good and warm, about the end of May or the first of June, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Peppers hate being planted in cold soil. It can give them such a shock that they refuse to grow, and are paralyzed for weeks before deciding to recover and grow again. Some pepper growers even put off transplanting until the second week of June.

It's believed that peppers originated in South America, Goodspeed says. When Columbus discovered the Americas, he found a vegetable growing that reminded him of the black pepper from his own land. Thus, when he took them back to Europe he called them peppers, and their popularity has since spread throughout the world.

There are basically two different types of peppers, he explains. The sweet or bell pepper is the most popular for home gardens. The other type is hot or chili peppers, which grow best in areas with a long, hot growing season. Both types need similar growing conditions and most varieties grow well here in Utah.

"Peppers prefer a warm, sunny location," Goodspeed says. "I have found that whether peppers are planted the middle of May or the first week of June, their fruit matures about the same time. When selecting transplants from the nursery, look for plants that are not in bloom, and have good, deep-green color. Check also to make sure they are not overly root bound in their small pot."

Space pepper plants between 14 to 18 inches apart, depending on the size of the variety, he says. Do not be tempted to crowd peppers into a small area, or they will not produce well.

Fertilize pepper plants when they are planted. Dig a hole two to four inches deep and about four inches to the side of the plant, then place a small handful of all-purpose fertilizer in and cover it with soil. This puts the nutrients in close proximity to the roots so they can quickly find them. After the plants set their first fruits, side-dress with a small amount of nitrogen fertilizer.

Peppers do best in a well-drained, organic-rich soil, he adds. If you have heavy soil, consider growing them in a raised bed. They also like to be watered deep and infrequently. Do not over-water them. Also, be sure to keep the weeds under control. Either place an organic mulch around peppers or cover the bed with black plastic and plant them through it. This both

reduces the weeds, and helps keep the moisture level more consistent in the soil.

Bell peppers come in all different colors, Goodspeed says. There are green, red, purple, orange and even brown peppers. Peppers need to be left on the plant until they reach their designated color. Most of them start out green, then change color as they mature. Regardless of the color, the flavor is generally mild and sweet. Some popular bell pepper varieties include Big Bertha, Yolo Wonder, Purple Wonder and, of course, the ever popular Chocolate Bell.

“There are hundreds of different hot pepper varieties,” he says. “Some are edible, and others are simply dangerous. I remember watching a friend eat a handful of Thai peppers like they were candy. Foolishly, I decided to try them. I popped one in my mouth, and nothing has tasted the same since.”

Those Thai hot peppers can be grown in Northern Utah, he says. Other favorite hot peppers include Jalapeno, Super Chili, Super Hungarian Hot and the king of heat, Habanero. Habanero peppers have a well-deserved warning label that reads, “handle with caution.”

Peppers have few insect or disease problems, he says. The main problem peppers encounter is blossom end rot. The symptoms of this disease include a brown or purplish colored, soft, sunken spot on the blossom end of the fruit. To avoid this problem, keep water applications consistent throughout the summer, and put down a good mulch. If blossom end rot does occur, do not be too concerned. It normally only affects the first fruit or two.

Mature peppers are easy to remove from the plant, Goodspeed says. Harvest them while green or any stage after that. Use a knife to cut them off the plant. Once they are harvested store them in the fridge for a few days, or use them fresh.

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