



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Pepper Pointers: it's all about Patience

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Nowadays it seems everyone is lacking in patience. We all want everything right now. But gardening is really all about being patient. You put in a seed, or a tiny plant, and wait. And wait. Waiting is not new to the experienced

gardener. So, since you are obviously a patient person, you should have no trouble waiting until the second or third week in June before planting your peppers. I believe most of the pepper problems I hear about are due to planting too early. Like many other activities, if you want success you need to follow "the recipe." The ideal nighttime temperature for a flowering pepper plant is 65-80 degrees. In early June, that doesn't happen much around here. In addition to the temperature requirement, blooming peppers will not tolerate wind or excessive moisture until they are established.



Kevin Milaeger planting peppers

After June 1, once you are confident the weather is warm enough, you must check the forecast for rain and wind. If it looks favorable, go ahead and plant. If not, use your patience until the outlook is favorable.

You may have heard the term "hardening off." This refers to acclimating greenhouse plants to cooler outdoor temperatures. It is a gradual process, and different plants have different requirements. Peppers are of tropical origin, and they benefit from hardening off. When you buy your pepper plants around June 1, we are well past the average date of last frost. But, we usually have some cool nights in the high 30's, and peppers don't like that one bit. If



they are planted and exposed to low temperatures, they will likely regress, especially if they happen to be in bloom. Hardening them off helps to ease the transition to outdoor weather. It's easy to do. Unless it is very windy, and/or raining very hard, set your pepper plants outside for a few hours the day after you buy them. Bring them back indoors before nightfall, and do the same thing the next day, for an extra hour. Follow that regimen for at least a week and they are ready for planting. One more thing, reduce watering



caged bell pepper plant

during the hardening off period---it speeds up the process.

If you absolutely must plant peppers early, go right ahead. But plant another batch later, following my suggestions. See how things work out. I'd like to hear about your results. We all feel the urge to plant

early. To satisfy that urge, plant only the things that thrive in the cool weather. Peas, radishes, onions, lettuce, kale, spinach and other greens--- these and others can fulfill your desire to get your hands dirty. You will end up harvesting some greens well before you plant your peppers!

A secondary reason why pepper plants fail to produce is lack of pollination. Although peppers are self-pollinating, production is greatly increased with insect pollination. You may want to plant some bee attracting flowering plants with your vegetables. Lavender, fennel, oregano, alyssum, bee balm, catmint, yarrow, lantana, salvia, daisies, and many others are known to be bee magnets. Other plants in your vegetable garden, such as squash and cucumbers (which generally require insects for pollination), will also benefit.



Wisconsin Wonder

For some time now, pepper breeders have been creating varieties that perform best in specific climatic areas. For example, the American southwest, northwest, and Great Lakes regions all have vastly different growing environments. It isn't often that a plant performs equally well in all three of those conditions. 'Wisconsin Wonder' (North Star) is a large bell pepper that was bred for northern

photo: burke.ces.ncsu.edu

climates. We've been offering it for many years. This year I am going to plant it in our trial garden along with a few other bell peppers that were bred for the north. We are constantly looking for the best performers to offer our customers.



Blossom End Rot (BER)

I wrote about tomatoes in my two recent blogs and already I've had a number of questions about Blossom End Rot (BER), an unpleasant problem that plagues many tomato growers, myself included. The problem is most obvious when the fruit is

ripe---the blossom end (bottom) of the fruit has a large black leathery patch. Fortunately BER is not fatal to the plant, and there are steps we can take to minimize it. The cause is generally felt to be a lack of calcium in the plant. No, it's not just a simple matter of adding more calcium to the soil. Cool weather inhibits a tomato plant's ability to take in calcium--- another solid reason to wait for warm weather before planting your tomatoes. However, we do like to use an organic



tomato fertilizer that has added calcium, such as Espoma Tomato Tone (8% calcium.)

BER is most common early in the season (when temperatures are cooler.) After the first fruit set, I inspect the fruit right away. BER will already have presented itself, though it may be hard to spot until the fruit grows to, say, golf ball size. When I find fruit with the problem (at the start, it looks like a brown bruise) I immediately pick it and discard it---no sense the plant spending energy on fruit that will never be any good. This removal of bad fruit also signals to the plant that the fruit it produced is now gone. A new set of flowers soon appears, and a new batch of fruit is soon on its way.



Espoma Tomato Tone