

## Success with Sweet Peppers

When Christopher Columbus set sail for the Far East, he was searching for a quicker route to China and India, where he could procure valuable spices. One of the most sought after spices was black pepper (*piper nigrum*), the common spice that is nowadays usually found in a shaker on your kitchen countertop. The strong taste of pepper was useful in covering the disagreeable flavor of many foods, plus it was an effective preservative; during Columbus's time, food freshness and storage were big problems. Of course Columbus landed in the Caribbean instead of the Far East. There he found the natives eating the fruit of a plant that was new to him. The sharp taste of the fruit reminded him of the black pepper he was in search of, so he began to refer to these new fruits as peppers, and we still refer to them by that name today. This new plant (*capsicum annum* and other species) was in fact unrelated to black pepper, but I guess no one is going to change the name at this point. Columbus took these new "peppers" back to Europe, and their use and popularity quickly spread throughout Europe and into Asia.



Sweet Pepper Friggitello

All capsicum peppers are "new world" in origin. Recent scholarship indicates that they are all endemic to the geographic center of South America. By the time the Europeans arrived, birds had spread them to Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico, where the indigenous peoples cultivated many forms of the wild peppers. These areas are all either tropical or sub-tropical---peppers like it warm.

This reminds me of the most common problem that people have when growing peppers. Like tomatoes, cucumber, squash, and other plants of warm region origin, peppers should be planted outdoors only after night temperatures are regularly above 50 degrees; some experts even say 55 degrees. Not that they will die if the temperature falls below 50, but their growth will be stunted. Resist the temptation to plant them before June 1. (In a future blog I will discuss vegetable plants that can successfully be planted early.)

Generally speaking, almost all sweet peppers (and some hot ones) start out green and turn color when they reach full maturity---most often red, sometimes orange or yellow. They can be eaten at any stage. The green pepper's tangy flavor is due to starches in the pepper. These starches change to sugar as the pepper ripens, resulting in a sweeter taste. Perhaps more importantly, sweet peppers are much more nutritious when fully ripe than they are when green. A red pepper has ten times as much vitamin A as a green pepper, and three times as much vitamin C as an orange. The fully mature pepper also has numerous other vitamins and minerals. In most grocery stores, the "green" bell pepper is given much more space than any other type of pepper. I think there are two reasons for this. Once a bell pepper reaches full size, it takes about three weeks for it to turn completely red. Shortening crop time by three weeks must be very appealing to farmers, so they sell them green. Secondly, green peppers have a longer shelf life than red peppers---very important to the grocer. Thankfully, the pepper selection in most stores has improved dramatically in recent years. But if you can't find the peppers you want, you can always grow your own. There is a certain satisfaction in doing that.



Sweet Pepper Atris

Here are a few tips to help grow peppers successfully.

Plenty of sun is needed for fruit production. The more sun, the more flowers. The more flowers, the more peppers. Grow them in the sunniest place that you have.

If you are growing in the ground, rather than pots, be wary of what has grown there in the past. If pepper relatives---tomato, eggplant, and potato---were growing on the site in previous years, and you had disease, find another site for the peppers. The disease can stay in the soil for several years.

Fertilize heavily, especially at the start of the season. Make sure you choose a fertilizer that is low in nitrogen.

Pick the first peppers when they reach full size, but before they start to turn color. This forces the plant to produce more flowers, and therefore more fruit.

Pepper plants are oftentimes brittle. I like to cage them, or you can stake them for support. This is especially true for large fruited pepper plants.

Watch for aphids, a common pest on peppers. Control with an organic spray, or try using ladybugs or praying mantis, both of which will eat aphids.

When harvesting, use a knife or a clippers. If you pull on the peppers, you can easily damage the plant, breaking off a branch or splitting the stem.



Sweet Pepper Big Early

I mentioned earlier that pepper plants are sensitive to cold weather when they are first planted. They are also sensitive to cold at the end of the season. If your plants are in containers, you can bring them indoors if you are expecting an early frost. You can move them back out if the warm weather returns.

Adventurous gardeners (and foodies) know that sweet peppers come in many shapes, the most common being the familiar bell pepper, which comes in a range of sizes. The tapered bell comes in many sizes too. Lesser known sweet peppers include a long, thin pepper, and some tiny peppers of various shapes. This year we are growing nineteen varieties of sweet peppers, with an additional four planned

for our "Vintage Veggies" event in mid-May. Several that I think look promising are 'Friggitello', an Italian heirloom pepper. A tapered bell, it grows up to 4" long, and is scarlet red when ripe. 'Atris,' is a modern hybrid. Horn shaped, up to 9" long, orange red when ripe. 'Big Early' is an elongated bell pepper. Fruit size is 8" long and 4.5" wide, with thick walls. It is dark red when ripe. Try something new---do your own exploring of these interesting varieties!