



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

The Great Bell Pepper Challenge!

Kevin Milaeger

After tomatoes, bell peppers are the most popular vegetable here at Milaeger's. We usually offer about five kinds, including the "elongated" bells such as 'Big Bertha.' There are many other varieties out there, so this year we decided to try some of those and compare them to our current offerings. It won't be a "scientific" study. I won't be out there counting and weighing everything I pick, but I will be checking on them daily, forming an overall impression. I don't plan to spend too much time on taste, because it is so subjective. Also, some folks prefer to eat them when green, while other like to wait until they are fully ripe and have turned red. Plus, peppers can be eaten so many different ways---raw, roasted, fried, stuffed, you name it---we all have our preferences. Our main goal in this little project is to find out if there are any better varieties out there that we



Big Bertha

photo: seedsavers.org



Napoleon Sweet

narrowed it down to six. That's because we wanted to focus on those that have the reputation of being well suited to northern gardens. Along with the five peppers we are already growing we planted six "challengers:" 'Napoleon Sweet,' 'New Ace,' 'King of the North,' 'Wisconsin Lakes,' 'Bell Boy,' and 'Sweet Goliath.' Maybe some of you have already tried some of these and have some comments to pass along to me.

Peppers, both sweet and hot, can be challenging to grow. I think most of the problems can be traced to planting too early. More so than tomatoes, peppers are cold sensitive. They pout if planted too early. Also, if they are in bloom during an early cold snap, the flowers often abort. It can take weeks for another batch of flowers to appear, so your first crop is delayed considerably.

photo: ivygarth.com



can offer our customers. We want to make sure we are offering our customers the best varieties possible. It is tempting for growers to want to grow old varieties, because the seed is much less expensive. (This goes for flowers, too.) One old bell pepper variety is 'California Wonder.' It's been the standard for years. The seed of 'Big Bertha' (a newer type, mentioned above) costs approximately twenty times that of 'California Wonder.' The question then is: How much better is 'Big Bertha?' If it produces only one more pepper, for example, it wouldn't be worth the extra expense. That's what we are aiming to find out. While there are many bell pepper varieties out there to consider, we

photo: ivygarth.com



New Ace

Better to wait until June to plant, or have a very effective method to protect them from the cold. Fortunately, this year we have had a pretty warm start. If that trend continues, we should all harvest

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Tuesday 9am-8pm
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Thursday 9am-8pm
Taco Thursday 12-8
Friday 9am-8pm
Saturday 9am-7pm
Sunday 9am-6pm





King of the North

plenty of peppers. Speaking of flowers, some folks have mentioned that they have had many flowers but no resulting fruit. If cold weather isn't the culprit, it is possibly a magnesium deficiency. Mix two teaspoons of Epsom salts in a quart of warm water and sprinkle it over your plants; repeat two weeks later. Another tip for growing peppers is to harvest the first crop early, before it has turned its final color (usually red.) Some folks remove the fruit just after it is formed,

while others wait until they are a little larger. This is to ensure your second crop. If the first crop is allowed to reach full maturity, the plant "thinks" is has completed its goal of reproducing (producing seeds.) It is then less likely to produce a full second crop. If the first crop is picked when still green, that signals to the plant that reproduction has been interrupted and it then works toward producing more flowers. Of course, a fully mature pepper, one that has changed color, is much more nutritious (and sweeter) than when immature. Eating an entire green pepper will give you about 200 times more vitamin C than your daily requirement, and a fully ripe red bell pepper will give you more than 300 times your requirement. I can't recall ever seeing anyone eat an entire pepper, but I do it regularly, especially when I am out in the garden. I like them best after they have turned color, but there is something about the tangy bite of a green bell pepper that is appealing to me, too.

photo: ivygarth.com



Bell Boy

I like to give my bell pepper plants some support. It's not so important when they are young, but later they get top-heavy, especially when laden with large fruit. Wind can easily snap the stem. I don't usually support small fruited peppers, but the large ones definitely benefit. Since I plant my peppers fairly close together, it's difficult to cage them all. I put a cage on every other one, and figure that the uncaged ones get some support from the neighboring cages. That has worked for me. If you use a stake, fasten it loosely---give the plant some room to flex; if it is too stiff it's likely to snap off. When picking peppers, I always use a clipper. If you yank on a pepper, you can easily split the stem. If your peppers are in the ground, a deep watering once a week is enough. Container grown plants water as needed. Peppers need fertilizer to perform well. I use Espoma Tomato-tone fertilizer for



part of the 50 plant pepper trial

tomatoes and vegetables. In addition to the low nitrogen/high phosphorous combination that peppers (and tomatoes) like, it has 8% added calcium. Like tomatoes, peppers are subject to blossom end rot, and the calcium can help prevent that. Whatever fertilizer you use, make sure that nitrogen (the first number on the package) is the lowest of the three numbers. Remember that peppers are, in fact, related to tomatoes (as well as eggplant and potatoes), and are susceptible to some of the same diseases that plague them. When finding a spot for them in your garden, avoid areas where their plant relatives have grown in recent years, especially if there were disease problems. If that doesn't work for you, keep in mind that peppers do very well in containers. They don't usually need as much room as tomatoes. I think you could get by with a ten gallon pot, or maybe even a five gallon. Or you could put several plants in a fifteen gallon. Come to think of it, I think I'll try

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Espoma Tomato Tone

one myself.

Please email me (kevin@milaegers.com) if you have any questions or comments.



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