

How to grow peppers that ripen in the PNW

Plant peppers in your garden no earlier than the second week of June. Don't rush summer! Even then, care must be taken to keep them warm at night. Plan to put peppers in the warmest place in your garden. They do not like our cool nights. You may want to consider growing them in pots on a patio or pavement with a southern exposure to get the benefits of reflected heat from these structures.

Prior to transplanting, warm the soil by placing black plastic sheeting on the ground where you will plant your peppers, ideally a couple weeks BEFORE you transplant them. When planting, cut 6-inch crisscross holes at 24 inch intervals. After planting, poke large holes in with a pitchfork in the rest of the plastic to allow water to get to the soil. Place small piles of soil at edges to hold down plastic.

Prepare the garden bed by adding lots of well rotted--not green--compost (5 to 8 pounds per square ft.) to the soil. Turn compost into the top 3 inches (6 to 8 cm). Tomatoes demand a growing medium rich in organic matter. If you don't make your own compost, use store-bought compost or composted manure available in the 40-pound bags. Compost or Manure is usually less than \$5 per 40-pound bag.

Next, "harden off" your plants for at least a week to acclimate them to the great outdoors. Start by placing them outdoors in a sheltered location with 2-3 hours of dappled sunlight, but bring them in at night. Increase their time outdoors, but bring them in at night.

Transplanting:

Plant 18 inches apart. Water the plants well before transplanting them. Don't disturb the roots! Lift the plant out of the pot carefully, and place in the prepared hole. Place the plant in the hole and backfill with soil so that the soil line is one inch higher up the stem than it was in the pot to allow more roots to form. Gently tamp down soil around the plant and water in thoroughly with lukewarm water. At planting, broadcast (sprinkle evenly) a balanced vegetable fertilizer with a higher 2nd number (E.g. 8-10-8, 3-9-4, 4-6-3) according to package directions.

Create an artificial summer environment for your peppers. Grow peppers under cover for the first few weeks.

- 1.) Cover the transplants with DIY hot-caps—translucent gallon milk jugs with the bottoms cut off, no lid. You should cover them at night, and even during the day if it isn't sunny.
- 2.) Make a plastic "jacket" for your pepper plant. Cover a tube made of 2 ft. wire fencing with plastic. It will be open at the top, but it will stay warm with the plastic jacket and the black plastic you placed on the soil when you transplanted.
- 3.) Build a mini-greenhouse to house your peppers—DIY out of ½ inch PCV tubing arched across raised beds, covered with plastic and secured on the tubing with large removable clips. Leave enough at either end to close up your mini-greenhouse at night if you're expecting less than 70 degrees. Remember to open in the morning to allow air to circulate. Remove plastic if the temp gets too hot on sunny days.

Fertilizing: Peppers are medium to heavy feeders. When flowers begin to form, fertilize **every two weeks** with one of these methods:

- 1.) Side-dress them with composted manure or use a liquid fish emulsion
- 2.) Use a fertilizer that is lower in nitrogen than the other 2 numbers—E.g., The NPK number on the label should be something such as 1-2-2, 5-10-10 or 8-16-16. Follow directions on labels for amounts to use

Water in the first 7 to 10 days after transplanting at about 16 ounces of warm water per plant every day. Drip or soaker hose watering is ALWAYS better than overhead, which can encourage diseases that tomatoes are particularly prone to.

Wait two or three weeks after transplanting, and place a mulch of straw, herbicide-free dried grass, or pine needles to control weeds and keep the soil moist during dry weather. If you are using drip irrigation or soaker hose, you may remove the black plastic before mulching. The mulch should be about an inch thick and surround at least a circle 12 inches in diameter around the stem. **Caution: Do not keep the soil continuously wet or "soggy"**. That will kill (smother) the roots and will cause a stem disease (fungus) especially once it is really warm/or hot weather.

Space water out more after 10 days and ensure that plants are receiving 1 to 3 inches of rain weekly. If not, give each plant about 2 gallons per plant "per week," beginning by about the end of the second week after transplanting. Water deeply 2 to 3 times weekly (so, water each plant with about .75 to 1 gallon each time, increase water as the plants get larger and when weather is hotter. It's okay in hot or dry weather to water even more frequently with larger volumes. **To determine if your plant needs more water**, dig down 6 inches in a few areas around the tomato plant. If the soil is muddy and soggy at 6 inches down you are overwatering. If it's really dry 6 inches down, increase water. Your soil at 6 inches should be moist, like a mostly wrung out sponge.

This growing guide is provided by the WSU Extension Master Gardeners of Cowlitz County.

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