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Peppers

Peppers, and most particularly sweet peppers, are a hugely underestimated plant for growing in the UK. This is largely because they don't do all that well outside, but in the polytunnel they're a whole different story. Vigorous and easy to grow, you can have fresh peppers from mid July to the end of November – and they freeze well too.

Varieties: (sweet peppers): 'Sunnybrook', 'Sweet Nardello'; (chilli peppers): 'Iranian Round', 'Early Jalapeño'. Read the seed merchant's description carefully, or you may – as I once did – accidentally grow several kilos of very hot chillis!

Sowing: For a good harvest you need to start peppers off in modules indoors in February, ideally at 20-25°C. Sow the seeds thinly 0.5-1cm deep and put them in a propagator or cover them with a clear plastic bag, and keep them in the warm until the seedlings appear in a week or so.

Once white roots appear at the bottom of the module, replant them in fairly small pots (8cm or so), burying almost all the stem in the compost as you would for tomato plants. You'll need to 'pot up' the seedlings like this several times rather than just moving them from the module to a large pot. This may seem like a lot of work but it encourages the plants to form stronger root systems, which means more fruits.

peppers need potting up

ALWAYS read the packet make sure you grow the right strength for you!

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When the weather has warmed up properly (usually May) move the plants out to their final positions in the tunnel. This can be in the soil beds (40cm apart in a rich, well-drained location) or into 5-litre pots. I mention pots because doing this makes hardly any difference to the size of the harvest, and the plants are compact enough to be moved around when you need the space for something else – handy when the tunnel is chock full in the summer, as mine tends to be! The only drawback to doing this is that they're harder work to water, and dry out fast.

If the plants get a bit leggy it's a good idea to support them with plant sticks or short pieces of bamboo, because the stems are typically not as strong as they look. Once the first flowers appear the plants will benefit from a feed with tomato fertilizer every couple of weeks for the rest of the season.

peppers need support even inside your tunnel

as the flowers appear feed your plants with tomato fetilizer every couple of weeks

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Diseases and pests: Young seedlings can be attacked by slugs. Pot-grown plants can usually be kept in a slug-free location until the growth has toughened up a bit, but plants in the soil beds may need to be protected with copper rings for a few weeks. Peppers can also be prone to aphids and whitefly at any time in their lives: it pays to check the plants over every week or so (which is true of many tunnel plants) and if you find any nasties, squirt them off with water from a hand sprayer. Provided you deal with any infestation promptly, this is probably the only action you'll need to take.

Harvest: For both hot peppers and sweet ones, the fruits start off green. Some varieties (but not all) colour up as they ripen, turning red, yellow, orange or purple. You don't have to wait for the fruit to ripen, but ripening makes sweet peppers get sweeter and hot peppers get hotter. Any fruit that you don't collect can safely be left on the plant until the frosts approach and should then be brought indoors for drying or chopping and freezing. **Wear gloves when you handle chilli peppers!**

Recipe: There's a pepper recipe for everyone. From sweet, light summer salads to fiery chilli and extreme curries. Peppers add great texture and taste.

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GROWING GUIDE

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