



Socio-Economic & Environmental Development Solutions

www.sendseedstoafrika.org

Please DO NOT use Genetically Modified Seeds(GM or GMO). Ask your seed provider and if they cannot give you written proof, do not buy the seed.

Try to save your own seed that you know is safe and you will get more money for your vegetables if they are organically grown, which means no pesticide use for the previous 5 years.

How To Grow Chili Peppers

Are you growing chillies or chilis? Nevermind the different spellings, there are even more shapes, sizes and colours!

There are three ways to spell the name: chili, chilli and chile.

(As for the plural, both chillis and chillies is accepted.)

Chilli peppers are great to plant around your garden to keep Elephants out. They don't like the "hot" in the peppers.

What do chilli plants look like?



A bush of Cayenne Peppers

Chilli plants grow into small to medium sized bushes from half a metre to two metres tall. How big they get depends on the species and variety.

There are different species of chillies. Most chillies are grown as annuals even though they can live for a few years in warm climates.

Some chilli varieties are true perennials. Most of the common varieties belong to the species *capsicum annum*, the "annual" species.

(Bell peppers, called capsicums in Australia, also belong to the species *capsicum annum*.)

Chillis have small to medium sized, shiny, dark green leaves. The fruit, the chilli peppers, vary wildly in size and shape.

Chilli peppers are green to start with. Most of them ripen to a rich red, but they can also be orange, yellow, purple or brown.

They may hang down or stand up like little colourful candles.

There are even ornamental varieties that are mottled and freckled.

The different chilli types not only vary in size and colour, they also vary in how hot they are! If you grow chillies for the kitchen, choose your variety with care...



Chili pepper varieties. Photos by [Tambako](#), [Simon Goldenberg](#) and [Cygнус921](#)

Where can you grow chillis?

Chilli plants love heat. They are closely related to capsicums/bell peppers and also related to tomatoes (they are in the same family, the *solanaceae*), but chillies prefer their growing conditions a lot hotter.

Chilli seeds need 20°C to germinate, and it should be 30°C or more for the fruit to ripen. Night temperatures should not drop below 15°C. (At least not on a regular basis. The odd cool spell is ok.)

Chillies also don't mind humidity as much as sweet peppers or tomatoes do.

Most people will need to **grow chillis in full sun**. In the hottest, sunniest regions chillies still grow well with a bit of shade.

Especially afternoon shade can even be beneficial. (The fruit can get sunburned.)

If you live in the tropics or subtropics, great. Your chillies should thrive. Even the "annual" varieties should live for two to three years and they produce fruit all year round.

In fact, chillis are also related to tomatoes, so the growing methods and requirements are similar. Except that chillies need more heat.

People with small gardens or balconies will be pleased to hear that **you can grow chillis in pots**.

How to grow chillies from seed

You can buy chilli plants in a nursery or you can grow chillis from seed. The seed needs at least 20°C to germinate. Start them in early spring in cooler climates or any time during the dry season. (You could start them all year round in the tropics, but it's a good idea to let the plants grow strong before the wet season hits them.)

Chilli plants are usually started in seedling trays or small pots. They are very vulnerable when small and they don't grow all that fast.

Still, I prefer to start mine directly in the ground, because like capsicums chillis don't like being transplanted.

Actually, I only start them in the ground when I have enough seed to allow for a high percentage of fatalities. I usually have enough because I save my own seed.



Photo by [Lombardo, UK](#)

You can plant several chilli seeds per pot. Once your seedlings have a few leaves, snip off the weaker ones and only keep the strongest plants.

You only want one chilli plant per pot when you plant them out. Otherwise you will disturb their roots too much and they HATE having their roots disturbed.

If you grow chillies in seedling trays or little punnets, plant them out once they have four to six true leaves (about 5 cm tall). If you don't, their roots will start feeling restricted and it will set them back.

Chillies don't mind growing in bigger pots, so the timing for planting them out is not critical if you use pots. If you live in a cooler climate, use pots. Let them to grow to 10 to 15 cm. Make sure it's warm enough before you put them outside!

Water the chillies before transplanting, so the soil doesn't fall apart when they're removed from the pot. Be VERY careful when removing the seedlings from their pots.

Drop them in a hole in the garden, fill it back in, firm down the soil, water, done.

Growing chilli plants

Chillies grow in a variety of soils. Like most plants they grow better in rich soils and produce more fruit, but they will grow in any reasonably fertile soil and don't need any special treatment. If you use plenty of mulch and compost in your garden the chillies will grow just fine.

If your soil is poor, you'll have to **fertilize your chillies**. (And start using more mulch and compost...)

When fertilizing chillies keep in mind that, like their relatives and indeed most fruiting plants, chillies like potassium. Too much nitrogen will make them grow lots of soft leaves and no fruit.

It is important to **keep your chilli plants well watered and mulched**. Mulch not only improves soil over time, it also protects it from drying out.

Chillies have such a tough and hardy image, people often don't realize how sensitive they are when it comes to lack of water.

Make sure your chillies have plenty and never dry out.

At the same time, don't overwater. The soil should be free draining. Chillies don't grow in swamps.

Problems when growing chillies

Chillies have weak branches. If they are loaded with fruit they can snap off. The whole plants are prone to branches drooping on the ground and breaking off, so you may want to give them some support.

(I don't. I just cut off the broken branches and the bush grows new ones. Chillies don't mind if you prune them.)

A stake will also prevent the whole plant from toppling over, which also happens because their roots are only shallow and not very strong.

Root knot nematodes can cause the plant to wilt and die for no obvious reason. However, root knot nematodes are a sign of very poor soils. If you add lots of compost and mulch to your garden you shouldn't have any trouble.

Other than that chillies grow happily and aren't bothered much by any pests or diseases. If they struggle it's usually a sign that the soil is not as fertile as you thought.

Did I mention that compost and mulch is great stuff?

Harvesting chilli peppers



Photo by [Tambako](#)

Chillies are quick to fruit and flower. How quick depends on the variety and on the temperature.

You can harvest the first chillis green once they reach full size. Or you wait until they turn red, or whatever colour they are supposed to turn.

If you plan to dry them for chili powder or flakes, you can even leave them on the bush until they shrivel up and dry.

To harvest fresh chillies cut or pull off the mature fruit while it's still shiny and plump.

If you pull it off, pull it upwards, exactly opposite to the direction in which it bends down. Then it should snap off at the joint, without breaking off the whole branch. Otherwise just snip them off.

The fruit will last in a sealed bag in the fridge for up to a week. You can also sun dry it, you could also just string it up and hang it up to dry in an airy spot.

Pound it to flakes or put it in the blender to make cayenne pepper and chili powder.

A word of warning

You don't need to eat chillies for them to burn you!

Just wait till you get Habanero chilli juice under your fingernails for the first time...

When cutting fresh chillies, make sure to scrub your hands well after. Don't touch your skin and especially don't touch your eyes! The hottest chillies can make you go blind. I am not kidding. When working with dry chilli be VERY careful not to breathe in any powder. Also don't get it in your eyes.

Growing chillis in my permaculture garden

Chillies self pollinate, but occasionally they also cross breed. If you save your own seed and grow more than one variety, then the offspring may grow just like the parent or it may be an interesting new combination.

All this to say, I am not sure what kind of variety my chillies are...



Photo by [Sling](#)

The toughest and most prolific, the one that anyone should be able to grow, is a huge bush of **the Birds Eye type**.

Those bushes grow to two metres in size and are always loaded with chillies.

The tiny fruit is blistering hot. The wild birds love them (did you know birds don't feel the heat in chillies?) and so do my chickens.

The seed spreads through the garden via birds and chickens, and I am forever pruning and chopping the bushes everywhere...