

# Growing Chillies

*Capsicum frutescens/annuum*

## The plant

If you can grow tomatoes successfully, you should be able to grow chillies. They are a little different in their needs but are as easy to grow on a sunny patio, a big pot on a windowsill or in an unheated greenhouse.

Chillies are best treated as half-hardy annuals. The plants have a longer growing season than the UK climate allows, so they have to be grown indoors for protection against frost for quite a long time before you can plant them outside. In colder areas they may be more successful if they are kept indoors.

## Varieties and plant material

Growing chillies in a cool climate won't make them any less fiery!

There are hundreds of different cultivars of hot pepper, and seed is widely available from seed companies, or you can save the seed from peppers you buy for the kitchen: they are quite likely to be true to type. Choose ripe fruits, which should be really soft and wrinkly, before you remove the seeds. When removing the seeds it's a good idea to wear rubber gloves to protect your skin, and remember to wash your hands afterwards.

## Planting and site

Sow seed in late February to mid March. Either just sow a pinch in several 9cm/3in pots and pull out all except the strongest seedling, or scatter seed thinly across a larger pot and transplant the seedlings. Cover the seed to its own depth in compost and keep at 21°C / 70°F for best germination.

Pot on seedlings as they grow: if you are planning to keep the plants inside all summer they will need at least a 30cm diameter pot when fully grown.



If growing under glass chillies prefer slightly warmer and more humid conditions than tomatoes, with frequent misting or regular damping down of the greenhouse floor to encourage fruiting; aim for temperatures of 21-24°C / 70-75°F. Although chillies are tropical plants they can easily be scorched by direct sunlight, so use some form of light shading if the sun is very bright.

When plants are growing well, keep moist and apply a balanced feed every ten days or so, until the fruits begin to colour when switch to one with a higher potash content, such as diluted comfrey liquid.

## Pests, weeds and diseases

Not many things like eating chilli plants - the hot taste tends to put off pests. Attacks by green capsid beetles early in the season are not uncommon and lead to small holes like



Above, common green capsid and right, its effects on pepper leaves



pinpricks in the young unfolding leaves, but plants usually will grow out of this.

Like other members of the tomato family (Solanaceae) chillies are prone to attack by a wide range of viruses, which may show as a lack of vigour, yellowing or mottling and distortion of the leaves. Infected plants should be removed and destroyed. (Remember that some chilli cultivars such as 'Trifetti' and 'Fish' are variegated, which is normal for these varieties.)

### Harvesting and storage

Pick peppers when they are green or coloured, as you need them.

Chillies can be dried for winter use either by spreading on a flat baking tray and slowly dried in the sun or on a bright windowsill, or threaded onto a fine string and hung up to air dry. Either way, when completely desiccated they should be taken down and kept in airtight jars somewhere dark and cool.

Plants with unripe peppers at the end of the summer can be brought indoors to finish ripening, or have green fruit ripened off the plant. It is possible to overwinter pepper plants especially of the small bird-pepper types, by cutting them back to ground level and storing the pots somewhere cool but frost-free and dry; the resulting plants will get away much quicker next season and give an early crop but it's only worth it unless you have a particularly good cultivar or lots of warm shed room. Minimum temperatures are similar to the conditions for dahlias.

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