Planting Perfect Peppers

Peppers, like tomatoes, potatoes and eggplants, are annual members of the Solanaceae, or nightshade, family. More than 8,000 years ago, peppers, classified as herbaceous perennials, were cultivated in Peru. There are edible and ornamental types of peppers; both grow well in our area.

Three major varieties of Capsicum are used for cooking: C. annum, C. frutescens (tabasco) and C. chinense (habanero). Capsicum annum varieties include bell peppers and chili peppers. All peppers contain capsaicin which can produce a pungent taste. The amount of heat produced is measured by the Scoville heat index, which ranges from <100 for sweet bell peppers to >350,000 for habaneros.

Peppers are a warm season edible. Start seeds indoors and transplant after mid-May. Most sweet peppers mature between 60 and 90 days; hot peppers take up to 150 days to mature. Peppers need 6-8 hours of full sun, well-drained sandy loam soil and a pH of 5.8 to 6.6. A soil test will indicate which nutrients to add to the pepper garden. Peppers can also be grown in containers or raised garden beds.

At fruit set, sidedress with 33-0-0 fertilizer. Over fertilization of peppers will produce vegetative growth rather than fruit. See Rutgers Fact Sheet FS626 “Fertilizing the Home Garden” for more information. Mulch to control weeds and help to maintain consistent soil moisture. Allow 24 inch spaces between plants. Larger bell peppers can grow up to 3 feet and should be staked.

The major insect pests of peppers are aphids and the European corn borer. Damage can be minimized by maintaining weed free gardens and using beneficial insect predators, i.e., lady beetles. Aphids may spread a variety of viral diseases which can further weaken plants. More information on pests and their management can be found at njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/ and https://pestmanagement.rutgers.edu/ipm/vegetable/guidelines/pepper/.

Pick peppers when at a useable size. Allow some peppers to remain on the plant; at maturity, peppers will change color from green to red, yellow, or orange. Red and orange peppers are sweeter and have a high concentration of vitamin C. Store peppers under refrigeration in the vegetable crisper to minimize loss of nutrients.

Checklist for May

**Flower and Vegetable Garden**

- Be aware that the last frost date in Ocean County will vary from May 15th to 30th, depending on your location.
- Plant summer-blooming annuals and tender vegetable plants after the last frost date. Cover tender plants if frost is expected.
- Water direct seeded beds daily until seeds sprout.
- Plant dahlias, gladiolas, lilies, cannas and other summer flowering bulbs this month.
- Work to eliminate weeds before they go to seed. Otherwise, you will be fighting them for years to come!

**Trees and Shrubs**

- Remove spent rhododendron and azalea blossoms and apply a fertilizer for acid-loving plants, if needed.

**Lawn**

- Eliminate lawn weeds. Pull by hand or spot-treat with herbicide. https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs119/
- Mow lawn as needed to keep grass height at 2½-3 inches. https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs102/

**Ticks**

- Be aware that the risk of being bitten by an infected deer tick is greatest in May and June, when the nymph stage is active. See Rutgers Fact Sheet FS443 “Prevent Tick Bites.” https://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.php?pid=FS443