



Peter and his Peppers

by Bev Servadio, UC Master Gardener

My husband Peter and I love the month of May. We set out our pepper transplants and really start to feel like the garden is under way for the season.

Seeds were ordered in December. In early February Peter started the seeds in a 50/50 mix of vermiculite and peat moss. The containers were placed on heat mats keeping the soil temperature range at 70°F to 90°F. Germination can take several days to a month. After two sets of true leaves appear he changes the daytime temp to 70°F and the nighttime temp to 55°F. Peter has a talking thermometer probe that gives him the ambient air, water, and soil temperature. He keeps close watch over the seedlings! By May they're ready for transplant out to the sunny, rich in organic matter and well-draining garden beds.

Each variety was chosen with great care. We grow from mild to “gasping for air” hot peppers. The size of plant, sun/shade tolerance, watering needs, Scoville Heat Units, and reported taste were factors in making it to our garden. Because they would become part of the edible landscape, they had to be eye catching in plant, bloom, and fruit. A fresh picked pepper is amazing. The crisp flesh, the bite of the heat, and the finishing flavor make it a favorite food. We use them in our cooking and we make a beautiful pepper jelly out of them.

Pepper seeds can be ordered from several online sources for starting next year. Visit your local nurseries and garden centers for available transplants. Many great varieties are on display now from the mild to the extremely hot. Get them into the garden in May and they will produce until our winter frost/freeze.

Here are three of our favorite varieties of peppers. We like to grow them in containers so we can move them. Our enclosed patio is home to several pepper plants over the winter/cold season and we enjoy fresh peppers year round.



Black Pearl: This beauty won the 2006 All-America Selection award for culinary use and ornamental use. The leaves are black. The bloom is violet. The pepper is iridescent black – just like a black Tahitian pearl - and changes to a vivid red pearl when fully ripe. I spotted several used as a border around a garden. The winter cold had left them as black twigs with red pearls. It is hot, grows 14” to 18” high and 12” to 16” wide. Maturity (red) at 110 to 125 days.

Lemon Drop: We were looking for a citrus flavored hot pepper and found this amazing pepper. It has a white bloom and the pepper is truly lemon yellow. The plant is 2 ft high and wide, bushy, and very prolific. The pepper is hot, and the final flavor is citrus. I paired this with a citrus finish wine and make a pepper jelly that finds its way quickly to use as a topper for cheesecake or a glaze on grilled chicken. Excellent for container gardening. Maturity at 80 to 100 days.



Rocoto: The hot flavor favorite of the pepper group. The meaty peppers have a violet bloom and are red when fully ripe with black seeds. It's a perennial shrub with a life span reported of up to 12 years. It likes shade/filtered light. Must be sheltered in the cold months. Great for a container. Prune it for size control. One of the most requested pepper jellies. Beautiful red color, brilliant flash of heat that mellows to "I want more" within a couple of seconds. Maturity at 95 to 130 days.

Come meet Bev Servadio and many other Master Gardeners at the Tulare Garden Festival on Saturday, May 11, from 10am to 2pm at Zumwalt Park (on Tulare Ave and M St) in downtown Tulare. Ask the Master Gardeners your gardening questions. We have information on how to choose and grow flowers, fruit and landscape trees, herbs, hummingbird gardens, lawns, and roses, succulents, and vegetables in your home garden. We also have advice on how to manage insects, diseases, and weeds in your home landscape. Come out and see our table top displays and bring the kids, we'll keep everyone busy!

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