

GROWING CHILLIES

Chillies are the fiery cousins of the capsicum family. There are dozens of varieties, each with a unique character and flavour. Colour isn't a good indicator of heat - size is more reliable, and in general, smaller chillies pack a bigger punch.

The heat in chillies comes from the chemical capsaicin, which is concentrated in the seeds and inner membranes. The hottest chilli in the world is the Naga Jolokia chilli (loosely, the name likens the 'bite' to that of a King Cobra snake). On the Scoville scale (yes, there is a scale to measure chilli heat), Tabasco sauce rates at 2500-5000 Scoville units, Habaneros score 100,000-350,000 and Naga Jolokias clock in at 1,040,000. Wildlife experts in regions of India are even experimenting with this chilli (smear on fences and as an integral ingredient in smoke bombs) as a way to prevent wild elephants from destroying homes and crops.

Chillies are said to be anti-bacterial, to speed up metabolism and to cause the brain to release endorphins, giving you a natural sense of well-being.

A friend who is a longstanding chilli-growing aficionado has tried many varieties, but favours Jalapenos and Thai Birds Eyes. The hottest he's grown in Canberra are Habaneros. His tips are to avoid frost and don't overwater.

Site and soil

Chillies like hot, sunny positions and well-drained soils with lots of organic matter. A moderately fertile soil is good, but be careful not to apply too much rich manure as it will result in lots of foliage, but not many fruit.

They grow well in pots or containers, as these can be moved to protected spots in the garden or around the house in case of an unexpected cold snap.

Planting

Plant your chillies after the last frost and once the soil temperature has reached at least 20 degrees - so don't plant them too early. And bear in mind that they take three months to mature in good conditions, so don't plant them too late.

If you're growing from seed, sow them at a depth of about three times the diameter of the seed. Germination rate tends to be fairly high and seedlings will appear in about a week. They can be safely moved from when they reach around 10 cm in height.

Growing

Chillies are thirsty plants and if the soil dries out, their growth will be affected. Even watering, but not overwatering, is the key.

The first flowers will appear when the plants are quite small. At this stage, the plants benefit from a weekly or fortnightly dose of fertiliser. Once they've started flowering, the plants will continuously produce fruit while the weather stays warm.

Harvesting

Most varieties will start green, then change colour and mature in heat and flavour as they ripen. However, you can

harvest the fruit as soon as they reach a good size, no matter what the colour is. Use scissors or a sharp knife.

Problems

Irregular watering can lead to blossom end rot. Chillies grown in sandy soil or soil without sufficient organic matter can attract root nematodes. Fruit set may be poor if there are high temperatures during flowering - this will correct itself once kinder weather arrives.



Fruit fly can be a problem in warmer areas and possums and birds can be a problem just about anywhere. It may be necessary to cover or bag your plants.

Choosing and using

Fresh chillies tend to lose their flavour quickly, so if you're not using them immediately, keep them in the fridge. Chillies freeze well - just wash, dry and freeze whole - and can easily be dried by hanging them by their stalks in a well-ventilated area.

They are fabulous in salsas, oils, chutneys, curries and stir fries. Strange as this sounds, the best hot chocolate I ever tasted was a Mexican blend, flavoured with chillies and cinnamon.

Many amongst us know from experience not to get chilli juice anywhere near eyes or mouth! Wash your hands thoroughly after handling or wear kitchen gloves if you're really sensitive.

To reduce the heat factor of fresh chillies, try soaking them in cold salted water for an hour or so. If you get caught with a too-hot mouthful, milk or yoghurt will help.

References and further reading

- Organic Vegetable Growing (Annette McFarlane)
- From A la Carte to Zucchini (Anthony Barker)
- Gardenate website www.gardenate.com/plant/chilli
- World Vegetarian Classics (Celia Brooks Brown)

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