

Bring on the summer heat with ornamental peppers

by Colleen O'Neill Nice



LEFT: 'Bird Pepper' produces very hot peppers that mature from green to rich red. Plants can be grown as houseplants or outdoors in containers and garden beds.

CENTER: 'Black Pearl' is a 2006 All-American Selection award winner featuring iridescent, round purple-black fruit that turns scarlet red at maturity. The compact plants have purple foliage and grow 18" tall and wide. They look great in mixed containers or in beds and borders.

RIGHT: 'Garden Salsa' bears 8 to 9" long pendant pods that mature from green to red, surrounded by green foliage.

Last fall, during a visit to the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., I was mesmerized by the most vibrant herb garden I had ever explored. A sea of multicolored pepper pods frolicked above their foliage just waiting to be picked. I snapped photos excitedly, trying to capture the brilliant colors and unusual fruit shapes complimenting each plant. I was perplexed as to why this showstopper had escaped my list of plant must-haves. How could I have overlooked their potential? I needed to get the inside skinny on chili peppers so I could grow these captivating creatures in my own garden.

The backstory on ornamental peppers includes over 10,000 years of cultivation. Native to Central and South America, no other garden plant has as much diversity in its gene pool as the hot pepper. It is a member of the Solanaceae (nightshade) family, which includes important agricultural crops like eggplant, potato, tomato, petunia and tobacco. This family also includes plants that are toxic to both humans and animals, like datura and both deadly and bittersweet nightshade. Classified in the genus *Capsicum*, the ornamental pepper is included in the species *annuum*, and is presently listed amongst thirty-two other species in the ever-expanding genus.

Experiencing new popularity worldwide with the hot and spicy movement, chili peppers are not just for eating and flavorings. They are used in medicines, as coloring for food and cosmetics, as preservatives, as a self-defense tool (in pepper spray), and for the "snap" in ginger ale. Health-related uses include an aid for

digestion, sinus headache and arthritis pain relief, and diarrhea and shingles alleviation. For the percipient gardener, the influx of new varieties over the past few years provides a continuous splash of color, mostly from unique-shaped, brilliantly colored fruit, but also from awesome foliage.

The ornamental pepper plant is compact, usually growing twelve to eighteen inches tall and wide. Inconspicuous white flowers mature into pods that ripen at different stages throughout the growing season. This results in multicolored fruit on the same plant at the same time. Fruit shapes range from conical, slim, tapered and twisted, rising above finely shaped foliage. Fruit colors vary from scarlet reds, oranges and yellows to purples, greens, creams and white. A unique feature of the ornamental pepper is that the fruits grow upright above the foliage, instead of growing downward and hidden by the foliage. Several peppers also flaunt black, purple or variegated foliage, which accentuates the fruit. The fruit persists for up to six weeks, outlasting most flowering plants. Pods can be allowed to dry right on the plant so seeds can be collected. To encourage more flowers, fruit can be picked. Peppers can be eaten fresh or dried, whole or ground. The thin-skinned varieties crumble easily and can be added to a wide range of foods.

Some peppers can be extremely hot while others are very mild. The hotness of peppers depends on the amount of capsaicin found in the seeds and the white membrane attached to the fruit wall. Plant genetics and environmental conditions control the amount of

capsaicin produced. Breeders can turn up the heat, while drought and high night temperatures also increase the capsaicin levels. Ornamental peppers are often labeled as “ornamentals” and “not edible.” This allows the growers to use fungicides or pesticides thus propagating plants that are not intended for human consumption. If you purchase organically grown plants or grow the peppers from seed yourself, the peppers are edible. Be cautious though, some varieties are piquant and their colorful fruit may be tempting to both children and pets.

These peppers are easy to grow from seed, and you can expect fruiting to start in 60 to 75 days. Pinch new growth to encourage the plants to branch out



LEFT: ‘Orange Thai’ produces an extremely hot, tapered fruit that matures from green to orange. It is suitable for growing in containers and can be dried.

and become bushy. Keep moist, but not waterlogged, and add a light fertilizer to the seedlings. When growing outdoors, avoid high nitrogen fertilizers after the plants have settled into the garden. Nitrogen stimulates strong vegetative growth and fewer peppers. If grown as houseplants, peppers are a long-lived perennial. They can be used in table arrangements for the holidays and are a great way to bring color into your home during the winter. Grown as annuals, their heat and drought tolerance makes them exceptional bedding plants. They are the only summer annual grown primarily for the beauty of their fruit. Outdoors, ornamental peppers prefer well-drained, compost-rich, acidic soil in full sun. Since plants are frost sensitive, outdoor temperatures of 55 degrees Fahrenheit or warmer are necessary. Yellow leaf drop indicates that the plant is too cold.

pointed leaves. It’s upright, bullet shaped fruit clusters turn from lime green to red. Tall and upright, ‘NuMex April Fools Day’ boasts long, skinny fruits that mature from deep purple to orange to red. “None of these varieties have been tested for Scoville Heat Units [a measurement of the piquance of a chili pepper], but are probably very hot and make very good bedding plants or indoor/outdoor potted plants.”

CENTER: ‘Ordone’ is a hot, mid season pepper from Mexlco. Upright pods rise above green foliage in hues of light green to purple to yellow to orange to red.

Heat up your garden this summer and fall with colorful, long lasting peppers. For seed sources, try The Chile Pepper Institute (chilepepperinstitute.org) or Reimer Seeds (reimerseeds.com), one of the world’s largest collections of hot pepper seeds with over 2,100. Johnny’s Selected Seeds (johnnyseeds.com) and Gurney’s Seed & Nursery Co. (gurneys.com) also have several varieties. For locally grown plants in your area visit Grossman’s Country Nursery in Penfield for ‘Medusa’, ‘Black Pearl’ and ‘Purple Flash’ or Wayside Garden Center in Macedon for ‘Sangria’ and ‘Black Pearl’. Just outside of Ithaca, Reenie Sandsted of Bakers’ Acres recommends pairing ‘Black Pearl’ with bright flowers or other dark leaved plants. For Buffalo gardeners, Lockwood’s Greenhouses in Hamburg grows ‘Calico’, ‘Black Pearl’, and ‘Medusa.’ For 500 varieties of chili pepper bedding plants in season and fresh chili pods in late summer or early fall, check Cross Country Nurseries (chileplants.com) in New Jersey.

RIGHT: ‘Pretty in Purple’ is a great ornamental as well as an edible hot pepper. It displays masses of round, attractive purple fruit, stems and leaves with maturing fruits ripening through to yellow, orange and scarlet

Colleen O’Neill Nice is a passionate gardener and plant propagator specializing in hardy ferns.

Complimentary companions for peppers grown outdoors include vibrant colored annuals with similar growing needs and bloom times. Drought tolerant, late summer blooming gazanias love heat. Their brilliant, bold shades include saturated solids, striped bi-colors and multicolored blooms. Pair up chrysanthemums and pepper plants in containers to add a surprising fresh twist to the fall season. Ornamental kale can be interplanted in borders with peppers for a trendy look. Create a tapestry of color with ‘Black Pearl’ peppers and bright red verbena or try ‘Peruvian Purple’ peppers paired with lilac verbena. ‘Numex Thanksgiving’ peppers can jazz up a window box accompanied by the