

The Alternative Kitchen Garden

Episode 55 transcript



Hello, and welcome to episode 55 of the Alternative Kitchen Garden. I'm Emma, and today we're going to be talking about one of my favourite plants, which is peppers. But first of all I've got a bit of a plug for you, because over the winter I've been beavering away at a series of articles about green gardening, eco-gardening, for a magazine called Country Gardener. Now Country Gardener isn't a magazine that you can buy, it's given away free at various distribution centres throughout the south of England: farm shops, garden centres and even some tourist board offices. So if you see one lying around the March edition is due to be published on 1st March and thereafter each edition is due out on the first of the month for the next 9 months. And each edition will have an eco-gardening article by me. The first one (and I've been sent a preview copy and it looks really good) is on composting. So keep an eye out for Country Gardener magazine. I'll put a link to their home page in the show notes because they've got quite a helpful site which tells you where they distribute their copies, so you can keep an eye out in your local area for one of those.

Anyway, enough about me. Today we're going to be talking about one of my absolute all-time favourite plants, one of the earliest things that I started to grow based on the reasoning that you should grow what you like to eat and I think that peppers (sweet peppers) are some of the nicest things that you can eat. And they're also some of the nicest plants to grow. Usually they have dark green leaves, and they have quite a nice habit – bushy plants, usually, and fairly upright. They have beautiful white flowers that are followed by a range of different fruits. Different varieties have different colour fruits, of course, and you can get everything from a pale white ivory colour right through to a purple so dark it's almost black and everything inbetween – pink, white, yellow, orange, bright red, ones that stay green, you name it you can get it. And all kinds of shapes and sizes as well. You get the classic big bell peppers, you also get the Italian long red ones and you can get small cherry bomb peppers as well, so anything you want – there's a pepper out there to suit absolutely everybody.

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And it's another one of these plants where, if you sow too many and you pot them up and you keep them, a pepper that's flowering or fruiting will make a very good gift. They make great houseplants; they are self-pollinating, so you can grow them indoors on a sunny windowsill without any trouble at all. I've grown them in offices, and not only do they make great conversation pieces, but you get a nice harvest at the end of the year as well!

Most of the varieties of pepper in common cultivation, and that's sweet peppers and chillies alike, are from the *Capsicum annum* family. There are some chillies that are a bit more exotic and come from a different family, but all the sweet peppers come from *Capsicum annum* and most of the common chillies that you'll grow are as well. And they're grown the same way.

They range in height from about 30 cm through to about 90 cm, so that's 1-3 ft. It will tell you that on the seed packet, or on the label if you buy a plant from the garden centre. And they need a long season. Here in the UK, peppers are one of those things that do really well in a long, hot summer and are a little bit marginal outside of that unless you grow them with some protection. An unheated greenhouse or polytunnel is fine. Or if you start the seeds off early enough in the year indoors, that will work as well.

You can get some varieties that have been specially bred to be early and to work in cold climates. The Real Seed company, here in the UK, have a selection of pepper varieties (chillies and sweet peppers) that have been designed and selected specifically because they grow well in their unheated polytunnel way down in Wales. So if they can grow them, pretty much anybody can.

Even though they are bushy plants, they may well need a little bit of support later on in life. Especially if you're growing the ones that grow the big, heavy peppers, you will need to give it some support otherwise it's going to a) lean under the weight and b) you can get it so that the branches snap off. So you might want to arrange for some support if it gets a bit floppy.

Because of their need for a long season, the ideal sowing time is late winter, early spring, so that's round about now in the UK. And they will need to be germinated indoors, or undercover. They need some heat to germinate; I do mine on the windowsill. If it's warm enough in your house for you, it's warm enough to germinate some pepper seeds. With the right temperature they take about a fortnight to germinate; if they're a bit on the cool side they'll take a bit longer.

Don't forget that these are tender plants, so you will need somewhere to look after them until the risk of frost has entirely passed before you can risk putting them out in the garden. And they need light – lots and lots of light. In fact, I had some peppers growing in an office once (as previously mentioned) and it was dramatic. I moved desks and they had not a particularly bright position to start with and they grew. They looked healthy enough, but they were quite small, and we moved to a sunnier position where they got much more light and they just rocketed away. You could literally see the difference in their growth pattern because they got more light. So if you're

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growing them on a windowsill you might want to think about giving them a light box to start off with, which is where you cover a box with aluminium foil so that it reflects light back from behind them and they get light from all directions and some extra light. And that may well help to give them a boost if you've got low light conditions.

Once of the things that you might notice when your seeds start to germinate is that one or two of them may get stuck inside their seed coats. You'll see that most of them are unfurling and some of them look like they've got their hands clasped above their heads, with the seed leaves caught at the tips with the seed coat. And if you don't do anything about that, some of them will be fine and some of them won't. Obviously, those are their solar panels and they really need those to be spread out so that they can catch some light and grow some true leaves.

Now there are two things you can do. If you're a patient kind of person, you can drip some water or some cold tea (and that's tea without milk, because of the tannins in it) onto the seed coat, and that helps to loosen it up so that the leaves can escape. If you're less of a patient person, like me, then you can just wait until the seed leaves are pretty well developed and then just gently pull the seed coat off. And what you'll find if you do that is that usually it comes off one leaf OK and with the other leaf it tends to snap off the very end of the leaf, but that seems to be much less of a problem than not being able to unfurl its seed leaves. So don't worry about it too much, but that might happen and you might need to intervene gently to help your pepper seedlings along.

When your seedlings are at the true-leaf stage, and look nice and healthy, if you've grown them in seed trays you will need to transplant them into pots. If you've grown them in pots on their own, they'll be happy there for a little while. And usually what happens with peppers is that you pot them on several times. Because you've got them inside for a long time before they can go out in the garden, they'll go through several sizes of pot before they can be planted out. Of course they do make very good container subjects, they grow well in containers. The ideal size of container for a pepper is probably around 10-12 inches for a final pot. Like tomatoes, they fruit well if they're confined. As long as they're fed and watered, they don't like to be in too large a pot if you want a heavy harvest.

If you're planting them out in the garden, or in the greenhouse, then they need to be about 50 cm apart, that's 20 inches, and that's in a temperate climate where the cooler weather and the humidity tends to encourage fungal diseases and mildews. So if you plant them a little bit further apart, at about 50 cm, you'll get good air flow and that stops fungal diseases being so much of a problem. If you're in a very hot and sunny climate you might want to plant them closer together than that, so that the leaves on each plant will help to shield the fruits of their neighbours from too much sun – because you can get sun scorch on peppers. Not a problem here in the UK!

One of the fun things about growing peppers is that the fruits generally change colour as they ripen. A lot of peppers start off green, in fact they can be quite hard to spot to start off with, and as they ripen they go through a whole rainbow of different colours, depending on the variety. So you get ones that go straight from green to red, they

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might go orange in the middle, you get ones that go from green to red to purple. It's huge amounts of fun watching them. You do of course get some that don't change colour and that's usually the orange and the yellow ones, they start yellow and they end yellow, or they start orange and they end orange. Again, it depends on the variety – there are some that start green and go orange, so it's huge amounts of fun watching them do that.

If you pick your peppers when they're green, then you'll get more peppers because the plant will grow some more. But if you leave them until they're fully ripe then you'll get sweeter peppers if you want sweet peppers, or if they're chillies they will be hotter. And chillies, I believe, get hotter in hotter summers – if they get more sun they get hotter – so the heat of your chillies will also depend on the environmental conditions and not just the variety.

You will need to feed your peppers, like you would feed your tomatoes. You'll need to feed them tomato feed, so that's a high potash or potassium fertilizer, when they're flowering and when they're fruiting. You don't want to give them too much nitrogen once they start to flower and fruit because that will just encourage them to grow more leaves and no fruit. So tomato fertilizer, please!

Peppers aren't quite as delicate in terms of water as tomatoes are. They do like a regular supply of water, but blossom end rot is not something that you would normally see in a pepper. You're more likely to get them complaining about nutrient deficiencies by going a little bit pale, or something like that. So if you keep them regularly watered to keep them from drying out, they'll be perfectly happy with that.

Problems you are likely to encounter. Well, if you plant them outside when they're little they are prone to slugs, but in the greenhouse and in containers that's usually less of an issue. Aphids love them, again that's more of an issue if they're outside, and you can wash those off - with a jet of water is probably the best way – or you can encourage more ladybirds into your garden and they'll feed on the aphids for you.

Indoors the biggest problem is usually spider mite, and that's in the greenhouse. And you can discourage spider mites by keeping the humidity high, wetting down the floor and misting the plants with water every day. When you have spider mites, the leaves tend to go a bit mottled and a bit gold-looking, and you will be able to see the webbing that the spider mites make. Although they're called red spider mites, they're only red at a certain stage in their lifecycle, so if you've got these tiny things moving around on your plants, the leaves are going a bit mottled and you've got webbing, but you've got these creatures and they're not red – that's still spider mites.

It is difficult to control once you've got it. As I said, keeping the humidity high can help to discourage them from spreading. You can get biological controls, parasitic insects which you release into the greenhouse if the temperature conditions are right, and they will help to deal with that for you. If you've got a bad infestation then really the only thing to do is to remove the plants, which is a bit sad, and I've done it on a couple of occasions.

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One more problem that I've had, but that I've never read about anyone else having, is that my fruits tend to get nibbled by caterpillars. And they're little green caterpillars that, if you knock them around, descend on spider web threads, and I have no idea what sort of caterpillars they are. But they have a tendency to munch their way into the fruits around where they meet the stem. And then they live inside. They don't do lots and lots of damage, but it does make the fruits unappetizing, and if you damage the fruit it does encourage it to rot. That's an outdoor problem, I've never had them when I've been growing them in offices or in houses, but I have had it in the greenhouse, and I don't know a) what it is and b) how to stop it, apart from eternal vigilance. So I'm not entirely sure about that, but if you know do let me know!

Those of you who have been following my blog will know that last year I grew some peppers from seeds that I got in a seed swap, that were clearly saved from a supermarket pepper. They turned out to be a long, red variety, and if you save seeds from supermarket fruits they will grow, but they might have come from hybrid varieties so the fruit that the plant grows may well not be the same which you got the seeds from. So that's a bit of a magical mystery tour if you want to do that. They are easy to save seed from, and easy to grow from seeds that you've saved, so that's a nice project to try.

If you want to grow a variety and save your own seeds then you either need to grow only the one variety, because they will cross-pollinate, or you need to build an isolation cage for the ones that you want to save seeds from. If you grow them indoors and you only grow one variety, then it's not a problem at all.

And again, if you have been following my blog then you will have been following an experiment that I have been conducting over the winter. Peppers are perennial plants in their natural habitat, but here in the UK they're grown as annuals simply because we don't have the climate for them to overwinter on their own. A lot of people try to overwinter mature pepper plants, and you can run into some serious problems doing that because in the low light levels of winter they tend to shed all their leaves and look really, really horrible. And some come back in spring and grow new leaves as if nothing had happened, and some don't.

My experiment was to see whether overwintering seedlings would be easier, because seedlings have lower light requirements, and as I mentioned earlier on – if they're growing in low light levels seedlings will grow slowly and when the light levels pick up they will start to grow faster. So I thought that they may well overwinter more successfully than a mature plant, and give a good head start on the season.

I tried to put some peppers outside in the Grow Dome, and that turned out to be a little bit on the cold side for them. There's no heat in the Grow Dome and the temperature does plummet below freezing, just a little bit, on very cold nights and the peppers didn't like it. They survived the start of the winter, but eventually they succumbed to probably a combination of the low light levels and the cold. The ones on my bedroom windowsill are doing much better. They're about 6 inches tall now. I've got 3 left and they're doing pretty well, so that looks like it could be a good start to the season. We'll have to see how they get on and whether they fruit any faster or have heavier

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crops than the ones I'm just sowing now. So keep an eye on my blog and you'll be able to find out what happens with my overwintering peppers.

In the meantime, Madeleine from Mad About Herbs is here and she's going to tell us about growing herbs in allotments.

Hello, this is Madeleine Giddens from Mad About Herbs. Today I wanted to talk about the use of herbs on allotments, or in your fruit and vegetable gardens. In general, I would plant annual herbs with the vegetables and perennial herbs (like sage, rosemary and thyme) in a separate herb patch or bed, or at the end of a bed so that they won't be disturbed by the vegetable harvesting.

Two of the most useful herbs for making a liquid fertilizer, or as a compost activator, are comfrey and nettles, both of which are easy to grow. Placing comfrey or nettles on the compost heap acts as an activator. Comfrey adds potash and nitrogen, and nettles have many trace minerals, including iron, which are broken down either on the ground, in the liquid feed that you make or on the compost heap. And with the nettles you can, of course, make nettle soup, which tastes much nicer than it sounds!

Another good herb would be marigolds, which are great for repelling insects. There's several types. There's calendula, which is sometimes called pot marigold, and there's French marigolds. Both of those, and also basil, help to repel whitefly, flea beetles and aphids. And if you place a pot of French marigolds near your windowsill herbs that can help repel whitefly and aphids from them. I don't say calendula because they'd probably get too big, I think, for your windowsill.

I've also read a couple of times that the roots of African marigolds (which are Tagetes erecta) exude a substance that combats the spread of couch grass, ground elder, ivy and horsetail. Our allotment has a serious couch grass problem, so I'll be trying that out this year. If anyone has used this method, I'd be interested to know what results you got.

Another useful herb is hyssop, which attracts cabbage white butterflies, so helping to keep it away from your cabbages. Mint is apparently disliked by mice and also helps to repel cabbage grubs and flies, but remember that mint is very invasive itself so you might want to grow it in a pot and sink it into the ground, or just move the pot around as you need to. And of course you can make your own mint sauce with it as well.

Nasturtiums attract black fly, as many of you may know, so that helps to protect the plants, and it also protects plants from aphids and whitefly. They're good placed near to bean plants or roses, to reduce the black fly on them, and even in the greenhouse if you have space.

Chives and garlic planted at the base of roses or fruit trees help to deter insects from climbing up the trunk. Another useful one is chamomile, which is often referred to as the plant physician because when it's grown next to a sickly edible plant it stimulates growth and improves its flavour.

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A few herbs that attract beneficial insects are borage, catmint, chives, lavender, lemon balm, mint, rosemary, sage, tansy, thyme, and/ or germander. There are many more, of course.

Well I hope that's given you a few ideas about which herbs you might find of use on your allotment or vegetable patches. If you'd like to find out more, or would like to receive a copy of my free e-book, called '7 everyday herbs made simple', you can get that by subscribing to my monthly newsletter by visiting <http://www.madaboutherbs.co.uk>.

So that was Madeleine from Mad About Herbs, telling us a little bit about growing herbs in allotments and kitchen gardens – so thanks for that, Madeleine. It only remains for me to say that you can email me at akgpodcast@gmail.com, you can leave a message on the show home page (which is <http://coopette.com/akg>) and you can join us in the Facebook group – and I'll put a link to that in the show notes.

Next week, if all goes to plan, I'll be talking about aubergines (eggplants if you're in the US), so if you've got any hints and tips about those that you'd like to share, by all means send me an email. In the meantime, have a great week in your garden. Goodbye!

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