

# A Pepper Primer

*Get Started Growing, Eating and Enjoying a Versatile Vegetable*

Master Gardeners of  
Northern Virginia

Potomac Overlook  
Organic Vegetable Garden

Pepper Fest 2025



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# Pepper Primer: Introduction



Peppers are a fruiting plant that originated in the Americas thousands of years ago, and spread throughout the world. Most Americans are familiar with a fairly small number of pepper varieties which are readily available at large grocery store chains, but there are hundreds of interesting sweet and hot pepper varieties awaiting exploration!

Each year since 2014, the coordinators of the Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia Organic Vegetable Garden (OVG) located in Potomac Overlook Park in Arlington, Virginia, have planned an autumn celebration and garden tour. In 2018 they decided to focus on their pepper crop for the mid-September gathering, and Pepper Fest was born. Visitors can learn more about both sweet and hot peppers, taste varieties that may be new to them, and tour the pepper beds of this beautiful garden. This booklet is designed to enhance Pepper Fest and highlight the work of the OVG gardeners, offer practical pointers on growing and enjoying your own peppers, introduce a number of pepper varieties grown in the garden in 2025, and provide some simple pepper recipes.

Much more information about peppers is available than can fit into one short booklet, so follow the links to other sources of information throughout these pages, and in the Resources section. Enjoy learning about the wonderful and satisfying world of peppers!



**Did you Know?** There are thousands of varieties of peppers, ranging from the least hot (bell peppers) to some of the hottest on the planet like Carolina Reaper or Ghost Pepper. Pepper heat is measured in “Scoville Heat Units” and the Carolina Reaper has a rating of over 1.6 million!

# Getting Started with Peppers

## *Know Before You Grow!*

**So, you want to try growing your own peppers? Here are some questions and considerations to get you started; later chapters will give more detailed growing tips.**

- 1. What sort of growing space do you have?** Peppers can be grown successfully in any garden with enough sunlight and well-drained soil. Many varieties make very good container plants.
- 2. What sort of peppers do you like and how will you use them?** If you don't like hot foods, look for one of the many sweet pepper varieties. If you do like heat, consider the level - from mildly hot to "blast the top of your head off"! [Check out this](#) extensive list of pepper types!
- 3. Consider the expense of successful vegetable gardening.** Even if you are going to try growing only a few pepper plants, there are expenses involved, especially in the first year. Make a shopping list of the supplies you will need after reading through this booklet and referring to other resources, and check prices of supplies at your local garden store. Gardening is like any hobby that requires supplies, but with the added benefit of healthier and tastier fresh foods as a reward!
- 4. Do you have the proper indoor space, and are you willing to make the commitment, to grow peppers from seed?** If so, do you want more common types of peppers or would you like to branch out to try some more rare heirlooms? How many pepper plants can you reasonably maintain in your garden? Browse seed catalogues online to read descriptions and get ideas, and map out your outdoor growing space to avoid growing too many or two few seedlings.
- 5. Have you tested the soil in your garden?** If you are going to grow peppers directly in the ground, Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia recommend a [soil test](#), which will tell you what type of soil you have, and what nutrients might be lacking so you can make amendments to the soil as necessary.
- 6. If successful, are you prepared for a bumper crop of peppers?** Plan ahead to find recipes for cooking your peppers fresh, or preserving them through pickling, making sauce, freezing or canning. If you have way too many, consider donating them to [a local food bank](#).



# Growing Your Own Peppers: Starting From Seed

Gather  
Supplies

Start and  
Maintain  
Seedlings

Transition to  
Larger Pots

Harden  
Off

**Starting peppers from seed takes some equipment and patience, but is very affordable if you intend to grow a larger number of peppers. It also gives you the flexibility of choosing from a wide variety of different peppers, not just those available at your local nursery or garden center.**

## Gather Supplies

To start peppers, first decide how many types and numbers of peppers you want in your garden. (It is easy to “go crazy” and start many peppers, but be realistic! Start small if this is your first try.) You will need, at the minimum: pepper seeds, one or more multi-cell seed trays (with drainage trays and a moisture dome), a bag of seed mix or potting mix, a water spray bottle and watering can, and plastic or wooden labels. NOTE: Do not use garden soil for starting vegetable seedlings.

You can successfully start seeds indoors by placing the trays directly near a sunny, south-facing window that gets light 6-8 hours per day in a warm room, although more experienced vegetable growers invest in grow lights and special seedling heat pads, both of which give your pepper seeds an even better head start.



**For more detailed information on starting seeds indoors, see [this article from Iowa State Extension](#).**

## Start and Maintain Seedlings

Start seeds about eight to ten weeks before you plan to plant them in your garden (see next chapter for detailed planting instructions). In Northern Virginia, this will be late February or early March. Fill the seed tray cells about  $\frac{3}{4}$  full of potting mix, drop 2-3 seeds in each, cover with more potting mix, and mist with water. Place the clear plastic dome over the seed tray (if your tray does not come with one, improvise with clear plastic wrap), and place away from direct sunlight.

In about a week to ten days, your seedlings should begin emerging. Remove the plastic dome and place the trays in the direct sunlight of your window. If more than one seed emerges in a cell, cut each down to one per cell using sharp scissors at the base of the extra seedlings.

Watering seedlings from the bottom of the cells, directly into the drainage trays, promotes stronger seedlings. Don't overwater pepper seedlings, they do not like "wet feet"!

If your seedlings get "leggy" (i.e., the stems grow tall with small leaves at the top), make sure they are getting enough light. You can also make pepper seedlings stronger by adding some air from a fan, which simulates outdoor wind.

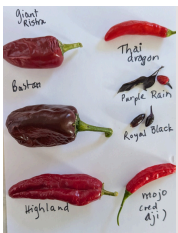
## Transition to Larger Pots

Within a few weeks, your little pepper plants should start outgrowing their small seed cells. When they get their first set of "true leaves" transplant them to individual pots. Three to four inch peat pots are a good choice, though plastic pots (or even plastic cups with holes poked into them as pictured here) work well too. Be sure the pots have good drainage. Place pots in a tray and continue watering from the bottom.



## Harden Off

About two weeks before you plant your peppers in the ground or in outdoor containers, you will want to "harden them off," which means introducing them to outdoor conditions. Start slowly by bringing your plants outdoors for thirty minutes, placing them in the shade, sheltered from strong wind. (Be sure to bring them back indoors when the temperatures start dropping in the late afternoon!) Gradually introduce them to more light and time outdoors, being sure not to expose them to strong sunlight to avoid burning the tender leaves.



**Did you know?** You can save seeds from your favorite peppers to plant in next year's garden, or swap them with other pepper growers. [See this presentation](#) for more information on how to save your seeds.



# Planting Your Seedlings

*Giving your Peppers the Best Start in the Garden*

## When to Plant

## Where to Plant

## Nurturing Healthy Plants

## Harvesting Tips

### When to Plant

Peppers are a warm weather crop, so wait to transplant your tender seedlings until there is no further danger of frost and temperatures are in the mid-60s to low 70s during the day and no lower than the mid-50s at night. This may differ from year to year, but late April to mid-May is usually a safe time period.

### Where to Plant

Peppers like sun, so plan to plant your peppers in the ground or in raised beds, or place your containers, in a location that gets at least eight hours of sun per day. If you are uncertain about the make-up of your garden soil, it is recommended that you do a soil test, and even if you have sufficient nutrients in your soil, amending with additional fertilizer (see below) will help your peppers thrive.

### **No Space, No Problem!**

Many kinds of peppers do well in containers, so if you don't have a large enough garden space, or any garden space at all, don't despair! Here are some simple container growing ideas. Follow the links to learn more:

- Be sure to know how large the pepper plant usually grows, to be aware of how large a container you will need. Seed packets or instructions on the labels of plants from nurseries will give growing guidelines. A five-gallon container is usually large enough for most pepper types.
- Choose a container with excellent drainage. Peppers do not like to have “wet feet” and too much accumulated water also promotes some diseases. [This video](#) from experienced gardener James Prigioni shows how to prepare inexpensive five-gallon food grade plastic containers to grow peppers and gives many other great tips for success! See also [this presentation](#).
- Avoid using garden soil for container growing. Choose a good quality growing mix or potting soil available from your local garden store or nursery. (If you are going to grow many plants, you might consider making your own soil mixture for containers. There are many “recipes” for this mixture available such as [this one](#) from the Savvy Gardener site.) See below for fertilizer recommendations to keep your plants healthy.
- Your pepper plants will probably need to be supported as they grow taller. Insert a wooden stake, or use a tomato cage, securely in the container for this purpose. As in your in-ground garden or raised bed, it is best to insert the support when you transplant the seedling to avoid disturbing the roots when the plants get larger.
- Follow watering and harvesting advice, below. Be aware that plants in containers can dry out faster than those in the ground, so check frequently to make sure your plants are getting just the right amount of water.

## **Nurturing Healthy Plants**

Healthy pepper plants need a good start to grow well.

When transplanting, try to keep as much of the soil around the transplant intact as possible. Dig a hole large enough to plant the pepper up to the same point where the stem emerged from the seedling pot. Add a support such as a wooden stake or tomato cage at the time of transplanting. Water thoroughly after planting. And be sure to add a label to remind yourself what type of pepper is growing where!

At the OVG, gardeners like to dip the roots of the transplants in a fish emulsion when transplanting seedlings into the garden, and also add alfalfa meal, mixed into the soil before planting. Both are good sources of nitrogen, which the plants need early in their garden beginnings. Later, when they start to set fruits, adding a fertilizer that is more balanced, instead of nitrogen rich, is necessary for peppers to do well.

It is recommended to mulch around your peppers to keep moisture in when you water, and to control weeds. Well-seasoned compost or shredded leaf mulch are good choices.

Check your plants for stress, disease, and pest infestation regularly. (See the section of this booklet on Pepper Problems for pest problems and how to deal with them.)

## **Harvesting Tips**

It is fun to watch for your pepper plant's first flowers, and for tiny fruits to emerge! Some pepper gardeners recommend nipping off the earliest fruits to promote further fruiting, but other experienced pepper growers say this is not necessary.

Many peppers turn from green to red or orange (even yellow, purple or brown) when they are fully ripe. Hot varieties will be hotter, and sweet varieties more sweet, if you allow them to do so. Most peppers can be safely eaten when green, and some (like shishitos and jalapenos) are best harvested green, and some do not turn other colors when mature. (Be sure you know what color the ripe fruits on your pepper types are supposed to be to avoid surprises!) Also know how large the peppers are supposed to get and allow them to reach their full growth.

To harvest your peppers, cut the stems instead of pulling them, to avoid damaging the plants.



# Pepper Problems

*What's gotten into your peppers?*

**You've planted your peppers, and now await your first harvest! (Be patient, most peppers usually take a minimum of 60 days to mature.) What are some common problems to look out for?**

**A Cautionary Tale, and Resources**

**Problems of Too Much or Too Little Water**

**Common Fungal, Bacterial and Viral Problems**

**Insect Problems**

## ***The Tale of an Epic Pepper Fail at the Organic Vegetable Garden***

Even Master Gardeners get the pepper pest blues. Before Pepper Fest was born following an particularly abundant pepper crop in 2018, the coordinators of the Organic Vegetable Garden experienced a year when every single pepper plant in the garden dropped all of its leaves and eventually died. This led the gardeners to research the cause and cure for this pepper plague and discovered it was phytophthora blight, which causes leaves to fall and eventually kills the whole pepper plant. The next year, they sought out varieties of peppers more resistant to the disease.

## **Sources for Diagnosing and Treating Pepper Problems**

For more information on pepper pests, Penn State University's Plant Village site has this [excellent illustrated guide](#), aimed at bell peppers but applicable to many other varieties. You can also search for pepper problems using the Virginia Tech [Plant Problem Image Gallery](#) website. (Click on each row to see images.)

If your pepper problem is not easily diagnosed by consulting online information, do not hesitate to call, email or stop into your local Extension Office Help Desk, staffed by Master Gardeners! In Arlington and Alexandria, the Help Desk is staffed Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to noon (except for holidays) and is located at the Fairlington Community Center at 3308 South Stafford Street, Arlington, VA 22206. You can call them at [\(703\) 228-6414](tel:7032286414) or email them at [mgarlalex@gmail.com](mailto:mgarlalex@gmail.com). **Snap a photo of your problem or pest for the best diagnosis!**

## **Water - Too Much, or Too Little**

We would hope that Mother Nature would regulate the rains to keep our vegetable gardens healthy, but that is not the case in most years. Unless you have the resources to install drip irrigation, you will be watering your pepper plants with a hose or watering can to make up for rainfall storages.

In dry spells, a good rule of thumb is to water peppers one to two inches per week. If your pepper plant leaves look wilted, it is a good indication that they need a hearty drink!

Too much rain can also cause problems. Deluges that don't let up can drown your young pepper plants, and sometimes lead to "blossom end rot" of fruits as too much rain dilutes the calcium needed to form healthy fruits in peppers as well as tomatoes and eggplants. (Ironically, too little water can also lead to blossom end rot. Read more about the problem in [Virginia Tech Extension Publication 450-703](#).) Adding a calcium rich fertilizer as per manufacturer instructions usually helps, but often the problem resolves itself when a normal amount of rain resumes.

## **Fungal, Bacterial and Viral Diseases**

A wide variety of fungal, bacterial and viral diseases can befall peppers. About 85 percent of these problems will turn out to be fungal, but bacteria and viruses can also wreak havoc on your plants. Here are three of the most common problems:

**Fusarium Wilt** - This fungal pest is caused when fusarium spores get into your garden soil. It causes yellowing and wilting of the leaves and eventually kills the plants. There is no cure and the spores can stick around in your soil for years; see Best Practices below to prevent a recurrence.

**Anthracnose** - Is a funny name for a nasty problem. This fungal problem causes lesions on your pepper fruits; these look similar to blossom end rot but show up on any side of the pepper. Some fungicides can treat the problem, but if you strive for your garden to be organic, or just do not like the idea of harsh chemicals, avoid using fungicides altogether. Remove affected plants and any weeds and debris that can promote growth of the fungus. For more information, see [this article from the North Carolina State Extension](#).

**Powdery Mildew** - A white, powdery residue on the underside of your pepper plant leaves, with brown or yellow discoloration on the top of the leaves, indicates the fungal problem of powdery mildew. This can cause the plant to drop leaves, and for the fruits to be stunted or develop sun scald. Try improving ventilation of the peppers by removing excess leaves, or even removing whole affected plants if they are too close together. Avoid overhead watering. [This article from the University of California](#) gives more information on identifying and dealing with this problem.

**Phytophthora Blight** - This is a death nell for your pepper plants! The soil-borne pathogen causes cankers on plant stems, rotten fruit, and complete collapse of plants. The problem occurs most often in very rainy conditions, or if the plants have been improperly watered. Read more about the problem in [this article from the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station](#), and use best practices to prevent a recurrence.

## Bug Attack!

Peppers succumb to the attacks of a variety of insect pests, too numerous to detail. Insects often hone in on plants that have been compromised by a fungal, bacterial or viral disease. Here are a few of the most common. If you see something “bugging” your peppers, take note not only of the actual bug, but the damage it is causing to your plant or fruits, to better diagnose the problem. [This video from the Pepper Geek website](#) is a great intro to identifying and dealing with pepper insect pests.

**Aphids** - Ranging in color from green to yellow, brown, black or gray, these tiny pests can cause curled or misshapen leaves, and a sticky or black sooty residue. They can be controlled by a stream of water from a hose, or with soapy water, neem oil, or insecticidal soap.

**Spider Mites** - Another tiny pest is the spider mite. Look for fine webbing, yellowish stippling, and a dusty appearance on your plants. You can use some of the same treatments as with aphids, or try spraying the plants with a solution of one part rubbing alcohol to one part water.

**Stink Bugs** - These invasive brown pests feed on your peppers and cause scarring and misshapen fruits. You can pick them off your plants and squish them (though they do live up to their name!) or drop them in a bucket of soapy water. If the problem is bad enough this year, consider row covers over the plants to keep stink bugs and other larger bugs like Japanese beetles off of your peppers next year. (It's too late when you find them on your peppers this year!)

## If the Patient Can't be Saved...

Sad but true...it may be too late to save your peppers this year if the problem has advanced too far. Here are some best practices to follow for next year!

**“Right Plant, Right Place”:** This is the “mantra” of the Master Gardener Volunteer! In this case, it means don't plant your peppers in the same place next year to avoid a repeat pest performance.

**Research disease resistant varieties of peppers:** Consult organic gardeners (such as the volunteers at the OVG), your local garden center, and seed catalogs for information. This might not guarantee a pest-free pepper patch, but it can go a long way in helping your chances.

**Avoid overcrowding plants, and adopt good watering practices:** Following the good habits of successful pepper growers will help ensure your success.

**Clean up your act:** At the end of the season, clear your pepper area of dead plants and debris. To prevent any disease, do not place the debris in your compost.

**Keep a pepper diary!** Note your successes and failures. This will help you do better next time!

**Did you know?** Peppers are in the same family as tomatoes and eggplant, and subject to many of the same pesky problems. It's good practice not to plant peppers, tomatoes and eggplant in the same place in your garden year after year for this reason. Consider planting a cover crop to add nutrients to your soil in the non-growing months.

# Meet the Peppers:

## *Varieties in the 2025 Organic Vegetable Garden*

Every year, the Master Gardener Volunteers working in the Organic Vegetable Garden choose a wide variety of peppers to grow. Volunteers start the peppers from seed at their homes, and bring them to the garden to be transplanted and tended throughout the growing season. Check out these varieties grown in the garden during the 2025 season, and try some yourself in your own garden! Follow the links from some of the pepper names to read more about them.

### Sweet Peppers

<a href="#">Mad Hatter</a>	unique shape, shaped like a hat, very sweet	plants grow tall and usually produce many peppers	use in any recipes calling for sweet peppers, good stuffed with soft cheese
Nitro Bell	bell pepper resistant to several common diseases	matures to red	good all purpose bell
Biquinho Red	small, teardrop shaped	matures to red	great in salads and on cheese boards
Brown Bastan Poblano	medium sized, very flavorful	matures to a chocolate brown, but can be eaten green	when dried is called an ancho, great in Mexican dishes
Mellow Star Shishito	Japanese frying pepper	pick while fairly small, mature when green	delicious seared in a hot frying pan
<a href="#">Carmen</a>	horn shaped, Italian frying pepper, disease resistant	matures to red	delicious fried, but also good raw in salads
Lunch Box Yellow	small bell pepper	this variety matures to yellow	great for snacking
<a href="#">Alaku Sarga</a>	sweet Hungarian variety, small round	matures to yellow; flat, pumpkin shaped	versatile and tasty alternative to bells
Venezuelan Tiger	rare variety, very sweet and fruity tasting	matures to red	great all purpose pepper; try in some Venezuelan dishes
Red Cheese	pimento-type from Spain	matures to red	got its name from use in flavoring and coloring cheeses
Magyar Hungarian Paprika	typically grows to four inches	matures to red	dry and grind for homemade paprika

# Hot Peppers

Early Jalapeño	mature early, mild to medium heat	preferably use while still green	2,500-5,000 Scoville Heat Unit (SHU)
<a href="#">Aji Yellow Peruvian</a>	fruity and slightly sweet flavor	yellow-orange color	30,000-50,000 SHU
Spitfire Anaheim	mild heat	disease resistant	500-1,000 SHU
<a href="#">Calabrian Red Hot</a>	hot, tangy and smoky	from Calabrian region of Italy	20,000-40,000 SHU
Kung Pao Long	long, thin, with thin walls	mature to red; used in Asian dishes including Kung Pao chicken	7,000-12,000 SHU
Habanero	small to medium sized, mature to red, yellow or orange	adds high level of heat to any dish, good for hot sauces	100,000 - 350,000 SHU
Ghost (Bhut Jolokia)	small, super hot, originally from India	use sparingly unless you like things really hot!	1 million + SHU
Christmas Lights	tiny, decorative, good for containers	purple and orange, edible	10,000-80,000 SHU

# Heirloom Pepper Spotlight I:

## *Jimmy Nardello (sweet Italian frying pepper)*

It's fun to try growing some heirloom pepper varieties with interesting histories! At the top of many pepper enthusiasts is the Jimmy Nardello, prized for its sweet flavor, excellent simply fried and served as a side dish.

### **The Jimmy Nardello Pepper Story**

Grown in the Smithsonian Victory Garden on the National Museum of American History grounds, the Jimmy Nardello pepper has an interesting family backstory:

“When the Nardello family immigrated to Connecticut from Italy in 1887, they brought a few pepper seeds with them. Jimmy, one of eleven Nardello children, started growing these seeds, eventually donating them to [Seed Savers Exchange](#). An Italian frying pepper, Jimmy Nardello peppers are good dried, frozen, pickled, canned, or fresh.”

<https://gardens.si.edu/gardens/victory-garden/>



You can read a more complete history of the Jimmy Nardello pepper on the Sow True Seed blog site: [A Seed Story: Jimmy Nardello Peppers](#)

## Observations from Growing Jimmy Nardellos:

My Jimmy Nardellos grew well and were disease and pest free, but did not produce many peppers. The peppers that did develop grew large and pleasantly twisty, but took their time maturing to red. Be patient with these, and be sure to fertilize them well. Their sweet taste is worth fussing over!

## Recipe: Fried Jimmy Nardellos

A version of this recipe, and more history of the pepper, is available at [Max's Kitchen and Garden](#). Pick your Jimmy Nardellos when they turn a deep red for maximum flavor!

About 8 – 10 Jimmy Nardello's peppers, or as many red ones as you have!

1 Tbsp. olive oil

coarse salt (Kosher or sea salt)

1. Remove the seeds and membranes of the peppers without cutting off the stem or slicing them in half, by making a short horizontal slit about three quarters of the length, starting at the top of the pepper just below the stem. Carefully open the pepper and remove the seeds and membrane.
2. Pick a heavy skillet with a lid, large enough to allow all the peppers to touch the cooking surface. (A cast iron skillet is great, though most don't have lids so you will need to improvise with a lid from another skillet.) Heat the skillet on medium-high and add the olive oil. When the olive oil shimmers, add the peppers. Cook them on one side for several minutes until the skin is slightly wrinkled and they just start to char. Flip the peppers with tongs and cook the other side. Continue flipping until all the peppers are slightly charred on all sides. Be careful not to burn.
3. Remove the skillet from the heat and cover it with a lid. Let the peppers steam for 5 to 10 minutes to further soften.
4. Serve the cooked peppers sprinkled with the salt, warm or at room temperature. These are great alone as a snack, as a wonderful addition to an antipasto plate, or as a side dish for pork chops or chicken.

# Heirloom Pepper Spotlight II:

## *Fish Pepper (medium hot)*

### The Story:

The fish pepper's history is tied to the Middle Atlantic region and the African American community. First noted in the early 1800s, this small, medium hot pepper was prized in fish dishes around the Chesapeake Bay region (thus the name) since the fruits are a very light green when they first appear on the plants, and blend into cream sauces and soups better than darker peppers, adding a secret "zip." When they fell out of favor, fish peppers were almost lost to the world, but eventually made their way into the seed banks of the Seed Savers Exchange in 1995.

You can read more about the fascinating history of the Fish Pepper on these Smithsonian blogs: [The Fish Pepper](#); [If you Like it Hot](#); and [Willam Woys Weaver: Trading Bees for Seeds](#).

The Edible Eden Baltimore Foodscapes site also has something to say about this pepper: [Edible Eden Baltimore Foodscapes— Fish Peppers: A History \(and a recipe to put them to use!\)](#)

### Observations from Growing Fish Peppers:



There are many sources for fish pepper seeds. I obtained mine from [Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds](#). The seeds germinated well, and grew into sturdy seedlings and young plants. After hardening off, I planted them in a raised bed with a well balanced soil in full sun, in mid-May. They grew well and withstood a rainy early summer, and extreme heat and humidity of July/August, and started setting fruits toward the end of July. The plants are very distinguishable from other pepper plants with their attractive variegated green and white foliage. My plants did not grow too tall (about 18" on average). They would make an attractive container plant.



## Recipe: Fish Pepper Vinaigrette Dressing

**Note:** This is an adaptation of a recipe developed by Baltimore-based chef David Thomas, and originally appeared in the magazine Food and Wine, August 2023, p. 74. Use it over any fresh or roasted vegetable salad for a dressing with a zing! If you can't find fish peppers, substitute a jalapeño or any other hot pepper you have on hand according to your heat preference. (If you grow your own fish peppers, use one in the green or green and cream striped stage for this recipe.) The original recipe called for brine from pickled okra, but depending on your taste, try any leftover pickle brine or any flavor of vinegar for a variation.

1 small fish pepper

$\frac{1}{3}$  cup pickle brine, or vinegar of your choice

$\frac{1}{2}$  tsp. dry mustard

$\frac{1}{2}$  tsp. white sugar

$\frac{1}{4}$  tsp. black pepper

$\frac{1}{4}$  tsp. salt (preferable coarse such as kosher salt)

$\frac{1}{3}$  cup olive oil

Remove stem from fish pepper, cut in half and remove seeds and/or use only half of the pepper if you want a milder dressing. Place the pepper in a blender with the pickle brine or vinegar, mustard, sugar, black pepper and salt. Blend mixture. With blender running, drizzle in the olive oil and process until well blended and creamy, about 30 seconds. Taste and adjust seasonings to your preference. Store any dressing remaining after use in your salad in a small glass jar and refrigerate for later use.



# Sweet Pepper Recipes

**While most people are familiar with green, red or orange bell peppers, there is a world of other sweet peppers out there! Use them fresh in salads, or cooked into pasta sauces. What else can you do with a bumper crop of sweet peppers? Here are some ideas!**

## **Adaptable Appetizers**

Small sweet peppers such as lunch box minis, or the uniquely shaped Mad Hatter variety, make great appetizers. Try stuffing them fresh with your favorite soft cheese and herb or spice combination. Or, stuff and roast in the oven at 400 degrees for 20 minutes.

## **Roasted Sweet Peppers (and how to make them into a pesto!)**

Roasted sweet peppers are delicious and have so many uses! Try them on sandwiches, in salads in the place of fresh peppers, or chopped in tacos. Any color sweet pepper with a fairly thick flesh are suitable for roasting, but peppers that ripen to red, orange or yellow are the sweetest.

## **Roasting the Peppers**

To roast sweet peppers, preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Wash the peppers, cut them in half, and remove seeds and white membrane. Drizzle or lightly coat with olive oil. Place skin side up on a greased cookie sheet (line with foil or parchment for easier clean-up) and roast for 20 minutes or until the skin is charred. Place the charred peppers into a paper or plastic food bag for 15 minutes to steam, which makes the skin easier to peel off. Remove skin and enjoy! Store the roasted peppers in a sealed container in the refrigerator for up to a week.

## Roasted Sweet Pepper Pesto

Make a delicious sweet pepper pesto from your roasted peppers with this recipe. Excellent on pasta or on toasted crusty Italian or French bread. This recipe is adapted from the [Pasta Project](#) website. It calls for bell peppers, but any thick-walled sweet pepper would work; just adjust the amount if your sweet peppers are smaller than the usual bells.

3-4 roasted red, orange or yellow bell peppers (see instructions above for roasting)

1-2 garlic cloves

½ cup shelled walnuts

1-2 tbs. olive oil

1 bunch of fresh basil leaves

4 ounces of parmesan cheese (preferably grated fresh)

salt and pepper to taste

Pasta of your choice, cooked al dente (until just tender) or toasted rounds of crusty bread

Fresh flat leaf parsley (optional for serving)

Place garlic and walnuts in a food processor and pulse until chopped. Cut roasted peppers into pieces, and add to the food processor with basil, half of the cheese, and a drizzle of olive oil. Blend until nearly smooth, with a bit of texture remaining. Add salt and pepper to taste. Add more oil if the pesto is too dry. Serve over pasta with reserved cheese and chopped parsley if desired.

**Did you know?** The word “pesto” is derived from the Italian “pestare,” which means to pound or crush, traditionally with a mortar and pestle. Today, blenders and food processors make preparing pesto much easier!



# Heat Advisory: Hot Pepper Recipes

**Many hot pepper plants are prolific, but a little can go a long way. What can you do with an over abundance of hot peppers? Here are some ideas.**

## **Use Fresh**

The easiest way to use hot peppers is to add them fresh, to spice up your favorite sauces, soups or stews, but be aware of the heat tolerance of the consumers of the dishes, and of the relative heat level of the peppers you are using! It's better to err on the mild side, and let your family and friends add their own levels of heat with additional diced fresh hot peppers, dried hot peppers, or hot pepper sauce.

## **Dry or Dehydrate**

Save hot peppers throughout the year by drying them thoroughly and storing them in airtight containers. Glass jars with screw lids are excellent for this purpose, just be sure they are thoroughly dry before placing the peppers in them. If your oven has a dehydration setting, try using it, if not, set the oven at 150 degrees. (Note: this might take several hours as the oven temperature is low to avoid burning, and your kitchen might be quite pungent during the process!) You can also use a dehydrator, or even air dry the peppers. See these [step by step instructions](#) from the Grow a Good Life website. You can leave the dried peppers whole, or grind them into powder.

**CAUTION!** When handling hot peppers, be very careful! Use gloves, or coat your hands with oil. Avoid touching your eyes or other sensitive parts of your body. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after handling the peppers. Use a separate cutting board when cooking with hot peppers and other ingredients. Remember, the seeds are the hottest part of the peppers!

## Plan Some Pickled Peppers

Pickled peppers are delicious on sandwiches, in salads, on tacos, on cheese boards - get creative! This recipe, shared by Master Gardener Judy Salverson, calls for jalapeños, which are mild hot peppers. Pick your own Scoville Heat Unit level pepper for a spicier version, or try this with a sweet pepper variety instead.



*Photo courtesy Judy Salverson*

### **Judy's Easy Pickled Jalapeño Rings**

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup water

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup apple cider vinegar

1 Tbs. kosher salt

2 Tbs. sugar

1 clove of garlic, minced

A dash of turmeric

2 cups of sliced jalapeños

Combine all ingredients except peppers in a saucepan. Bring to a boil. Stir in sliced peppers. Remove from heat. Let cool ten minutes before placing in sterilized glass canning jars and store in the refrigerator.

# Spice it Up with Homemade Hot Sauce

Hot sauce is easy to make from a number of different hot pepper varieties. This easy sauce recipe is adapted from the [Pepper Geek website](#) and uses habaneros (useful as habanero plants often have excellent yields). Caution, habaneros are very hot, 100,000-350,000 SHU.

## Habanero Hot Sauce

Yields five to ten ounces of sauce depending on the size of the peppers.

**NOTE:** Take precautions when cutting hot peppers. It is recommended to wear eye and mouth protections when cooking very hot peppers such as habaneros. Keep your kitchen window open for ventilation.

15-20 medium ripe (orange or red) habaneros

½ cup white vinegar

4 tsp. olive oil

4 tsp. granulated white sugar

2 cloves of garlic

½ cup apple cider vinegar or white vinegar

½ tsp. salt

Cut stems from peppers, and if desired, cut peppers in half and remove seeds for a milder sauce. (Leave whole, with seeds intact, if you want the maximum heat; leaving whole also produces less stinging fumes while cooking.) In a medium-sized sauce pan, cook the cut or whole peppers in the oil over low heat to avoid burning. Cook until soft, about eight minutes. Add garlic and cook an additional 1-2 minutes. Add the remaining ingredients and stir to combine. Simmer for 10 minutes. Remove from heat, cover, and let cool for about 10 minutes. Blend until smooth. Add small amounts of additional vinegar if the mixture is too thick. Strain with cheesecloth if you want a smoother sauce. Use a funnel to pour into glass jars or bottles and store in the refrigerator for up to three months.



# Acknowledgements and More Resources for Peppers

## Thanks and Acknowledgements

This Pepper Primer would not be possible without the help of several friends and advisors. Foremost among these is Judy Salveson, the advisor of this project: pepper expert, VCE Master Gardener and one of the amazing coordinators of the [Organic Vegetable Garden](#) (OVG) at the Potomac Overlook Park. Leslie Fillmore, Coordinator of the Northern Virginia Master Gardener program and frequent volunteer at the OVG, has been terrifically supportive. Andrea Mayorga and Sophia Fedus advised on Canva design. Arlene Reiniger proof-read the text..

All photos, unless otherwise indicated, were taken by Betty J. Belanus.

## For More Information:

Throughout this booklet, you will find reference links that pertain to specific topics. There are many additional, excellent sources for growing, maintaining and using peppers, readily available on the internet. Master Gardeners advise consulting reliable sources, such as State Extension Offices, which you can find by searching only for “edu” sites. (Try a search for **peppers site:.edu** ). Here are some sources to further your pepper research!

**NOTE: Links throughout this booklet that lead to gardening advice videos and blogs, and recipe sites, are not endorsements of any commercial products or services offered by these sites. These links, however, were chosen for their reliable information which represents years of experience in growing and using peppers, which supplement “.edu” site links.**

1. An excellent starting point is this very thorough presentation available on the website of Northern Virginia Master Gardeners: [Pepper-licious!](#) Here you will find everything from pepper history, to how to grow healthy peppers and diagnose problems, to delicious pepper recipes. Watch as a video, or review the slide presentation.
2. [This presentation](#) from the University of California, Davis, is also a wonderful introduction.
3. Several publications on peppers and vegetables in general are available from Virginia Tech State Extension Service, including [Potatoes, Peppers and Eggplant](#) and [Peppers](#).
4. The University of Maryland Extension Service is also a good source of vegetable gardening information. See for instance [Growing Peppers in a Home Garden](#).
5. A fun site to follow is [Pepper Geek](#). This site is maintained by a young couple who love growing and cooking with peppers, and they have a ton of useful information available.



**Interested in becoming a Master Gardener? In Arlington and Alexandria, you can get more information from the [Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia](#) website. If you are in other counties or states, contact your [County Extension office](#).**



## Make every day a Pepper Fest!



The Organic Vegetable Garden at Potomac Overlook Park is a delight in any season, and visiting is always a learning experience.



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