

Growing better peppers



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Question: How can I grow better peppers? Some of my transplants either die or fail to thrive. If the plants grow well, the weight of the peppers tend to break the branches before they are ripe, and if they get ripe, the peppers get burned by the sun.

ANSWER: There are a series of things you can do to get much better results. First, dig in a good bit of compost and a little fertilizer into the soil at least two weeks before you plant. It is even better if you can do this in the fall before the soil gets too wet to work. If you do this in the fall, it is hard to add too much compost and your soil will be easier to work in the spring.

Set up a drip irrigation system, using either T-tape or use 5/8" plastic pipe with integrated emitters. These systems last a long time and prevent the leaves from getting wet since wet leaves become a major source of infection.

Provide support for the pepper plant. The common, inexpensive, cone-shaped tomato cages work well for this. Place your newly-purchased plants in a partially shaded spot for a couple of days to harden off before planting them in the garden.

Plant your pepper plants deep. Dig a hole deep enough so that 1/2-2/3 of the green part of the plant is below ground. Break up the roots that are running around the inside of the pot. You do not need to remove the leaves that end up underground. Planting the pepper plants this deep will greatly reduce transplant shock and give the plant a great start.

Plant your pepper plants about 6-7 inches apart. This will seem to be too close, but it will help keep the branches from breaking off and will reduce the amount of sun scald as the plants will shade each other. Planting them close together will reduce the number of peppers you will get per plant, but will increase the number of peppers you get per garden area, which I think is more important.

Once the plants are planted and starting to add branches and leaves, pinch off the first blush of flowers. This will encourage the plants to grow more robustly and increase the number and size of the peppers you harvest.

Covering the pepper plants with a shade structure such as floating row covers will completely eliminate the sun scald issue. My wife came up with this idea and it works great!

The next issue is water and fertilizer. If the leaves



PHOTO BY BONNIE COURTER

The common, inexpensive, cone-shaped tomato cage, seen here, work well for providing support for pepper plants.

do not appear to be fully developing, add a little fertilizer and calcium as a top dressing. This is more of an issue with the hotter varieties than it is with the sweet varieties. Either too much or too little water will stress your plants and they will appear to be dry in either case.

If the leaves appear or feel wilted, poke your finger into the soil near the plant. If the soil is wet, then you are over-watering them. If it is dry, you know what to do.

Few insects in the Umpqua Valley bother pepper plants. The most common are aphids, which can best be removed with a strong spray of water. You can use insecticidal soap, but this, like all other insecticides, kills off the critters that eat the aphids as well as the aphids. Then the aphids come back faster than the predator insects that eat them. This starts

a vicious cycle.

You can start harvesting your peppers once they grow to full size. If you harvest the peppers at this stage, you will get more peppers overall. But the peppers will become sweeter and more flavorful if you let them fully ripen and turn to their ripe color.

Next year, consider starting your own pepper plants from seed. This will give you access to a much wider variety of peppers at a much lower cost. I hope you get a bumper crop of peppers.

If you do, cut the peppers in half, clean out the seeds, place them in a gallon size Ziploc bag and freeze them. You can use them all winter in cooked dishes. When your freezer gets full, consider your friends and the local food bank.

Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County

Master Gardeners at ask.extension.org/ask.

Presently, the plant clinic is closed until further

notice due to public safety orders.