

Mountain Gardener

For at least this past week or so, if you are like many other Mountain Gardeners, you have been visiting your spring garden, looking for some signs of life from the transplants and the seeds you have recently placed outdoors. Surely there must be some indication that you have done ‘things’ right, but the cold, moist soil remains barren and lifeless.

Just when you’ve decided you must have planted too deeply, or that a thief in the night made off with your potential treasures, the ground opens up and the world is green and growing by leaps and bounds. Blossoms open, birds sing and the fragrance of spring flowers fills the air. It doesn’t get better than this. You too feel excited and alive-knowing that you have played a big part in making it all happen.

Chances are, some of these rapid-growing vegetables are young peppers. With their amazing diversity of color, shapes and flavors, peppers are particularly rewarding to grow. The secret to successful pepper growing is to choose the right variety for your area, so be sure to check with your local nursery experts. They usually only stock plants which grow well here in Tuolumne County.

If you are just starting to plant your pepper seeds or to transplant the young seedlings you recently purchased from your favorite nursery, here is a step-by-step guide to help you have the best pepper crop ever.

1. **Be Sure To Select The Right Location.** The right site can make all the difference in the world. Choose a sunny well-drained spot where peppers haven’t grown recently. The soil should be deep, rich and loamy. If it isn’t, amend it with an inch or two of compost. Avoid excess nitrogen as it can cause the plants to grow too rapidly, making them more susceptible to disease, and less productive.
2. **Harden-Off The Seedlings.** Before placing the young plants in the ground, you will need to gradually expose them to the outdoor conditions. (This gradual exposure helps the seedlings adjust, so they have less stress when planted in the garden. Less stress means bigger, more productive plants.)
3. **Planting The Peppers.** Peppers prefer to wait to be planted outdoors when the danger of frost has passed. Space the plants 12 to 20 inches apart, depending on the mature size of the variety, and be sure to plant them a bit deeper than they were in the small containers they came in. (Like tomatoes, peppers grow extra roots from the buried portion of the stem.) Cage taller varieties so the stems do not break in strong winds or heavy fruit load. After you have planted the seedlings, water them well.
4. **Water And Mulch.** Throughout the growing season be sure that your plants receive an adequate amount of water. Check the peppers often during periods of extreme heat and drought, when each plant can take as much as one gallon of water per day. In real extreme heat, it is recommended that you place an inch or two of mulch around each plant.