



Growing chillies



There's nothing like sowing seeds in winter and seeing them flourish when summer comes around. As well as being a tasty addition to lots of dishes, chillies have a long season and benefit from lots of time to grow and ripen. Capsaicin is the compound which makes chillies spicy, and different levels of heat are measured using the Scoville scale, but not all varieties are spicy and some can even be mild and sweet. Chillies need lots of sun, so to grow from seed you'll need a warm sunny windowsill or access to horticultural lights. You can also grow from potted plants between March and May. Chilli plants need regular watering before harvesting in summer so this is a great activity for groups who meet regularly.

Materials & equipment

- gloves
- scoops or trowels
- re-usable table cloths
- growing containers – this can be anything with drainage holes which isn't too heavy
- chilli plants or seeds – you can buy these from a garden centre, save some from
- supermarket chillis or ask for a donation
- peat-free compost, organic where possible
- a sunny and warm spot, or horticultural lights if growing from seed
- plant labels

Types of chilli you could grow

- Alma Paprika – sweet, mild and peppery
- Apricot – mild and fruity
- Poblano – mild and earthy, like a green pepper with a kick
- Padrón – sweet and smoky, often mild but some can be spicy

Orange Peppercini – sweet with a low-medium heat

Early Jalapeño – fresh flavour with a medium heat

Tabasco – sweet and almost fruity with a medium heat



Setting up

1. Ensure there is enough space and chairs for everyone, including those using wheelchairs or who may need a lower table height.
2. Lay a tablecloth out and distribute your chilli seeds and plants across the table. Create labels or information cards so everyone knows which chilli varieties they'll be working with.
3. Set out equipment according to who will be doing what.

Session plan

4. Introduce the activity and what is being planted. Talk through the type of chilli you have chosen and what it tastes like. Ask questions and discuss food participants may be familiar with. What are their favourite dishes which include chilli? Do they enjoy spicy flavours?
5. Talk through the activity and each of the steps. Explain that because chillis are from South America, they grow best in a constant and warm temperature.

If planting from seed

1. Prepare your containers by filling them with compost using trowels and scoops, or participants can scoop with their hands if easier.
2. Sprinkle a few chilli seeds in your container and then cover with compost.

3. Write out and stick your labels in the pot so you know which chilli variety is growing.
4. Place on a warm and sunny windowsill (south-facing windows work best) or under a horticultural light. If you're uncertain the windowsill will be warm enough, you can cover your seeds using leftover transparent plastic bags from the supermarket to trap warmth and humidity. You could also try placing a mirror behind the plants to reflect the light back onto them.
5. Mist your seeds with water little and often to keep the soil moist but not too wet. It's best to water from above to ensure the water isn't affecting the soil's temperature too much.
6. When your seedlings are about one inch tall and the roots are beginning to poke out the bottom, they're ready to be transferred to a bigger pot. Be careful not to touch the roots as this could damage them.
7. Once the roots have grown through, you can transplant your plants into two-litre containers to grow chillies, or outside if conditions are favourable.



Growing from potted plants

Once temperatures are consistently warm, you can transplant your chillies into a sunny, sheltered spot outside. Acclimatise them to life outdoors by leaving your seedlings outside during the day and bringing them in at night for two weeks.

Once you've planted them outside, they'll need watering deeply to the roots, only when the soil is dry. When the chilli plant reaches about 20cm high, you can 'pinch out' – gently snap off – the growing tip to ensure the plant doesn't get too long and spindly, helping it to grow a good crop. This is a great opportunity for more skilled growers to guide newer ones.

Harvesting your chillies

By July, your chillies should be ready to harvest. Early harvests will mean milder chillies and allow your plant to grow more. When handling chillies, make sure gloves are available and remind participants not to touch their face as the capsaicin can irritate eyes.

Chilli plants are perennial, which means that with good care they'll grow back each year. Once you've harvested your chillies, chop back all the foliage and branches until you have a Y-shaped stick. Keep your dormant chilli plant in a bright room that doesn't go below 10°C and water occasionally, no more than once every two weeks. Once the days start to get longer, it will spring back to life so you can enjoy a whole new season of growth and plenty more chillies!

Further activity ideas

Which ones are hottest and what other flavours you can taste. Is this connected to the chilli pepper's colour? Make sure you're being mindful of how hot chillies are and people's tolerance to heat.

Chop up fresh chillies to use as a garnish, or create a dipping sauce by combining with soy sauce, minced garlic, a pinch of sugar and some sesame oil.

Dry your chillies by using a needle and thread to hang them up in warm, ventilated area. They should take four to five weeks to completely dry out.

Freeze your chillies whole. When ready to use, you can grate or slice from frozen and put what you don't need back in the freezer.

Pickle your chillies by storing them in a jar of brine, made by heating equal parts water and white vinegar on the hob. Add salt, sugar and herbs and spices to taste.