

BELL PEPPERS



Yuma bell peppers are a minor crop in the county with only about 100 acres in production.

Bell peppers are a great source of vitamin C. If you thought citrus fruits packed a powerful punch when it comes to being a good source of vitamin C, peppers have them beat. Green peppers have twice the amount of vitamin C by weight than citrus fruits, and this powerful punch of vitamin C is an antioxidant that may be effective in preventing certain cancers. Green, sweet bell peppers have 2 times as much vitamin C as oranges; red and yellow bell peppers have 4 times as much.

Bell peppers can be found in a rainbow of colors and can vary in flavor. The variety of the pepper plant and the stage of the ripeness determine the flavor and color of each pepper. For example, a red bell pepper is simply a mature green bell pepper. As a bell pepper ages, its flavor becomes sweeter and milder. Red bell peppers contain eleven times more beta carotene than green bell peppers.

Bell peppers are available and are in good supply all year, but they are more plentiful and less expensive during the summer months. Fresh peppers come in variety of colors, shapes, and sizes, but when selecting them, they all follow the same guidelines. Their skin should be firm without any wrinkles, and the stem should be fresh and green. They should feel heavy for their size. Avoid peppers with sunken areas, slashes or black spots.

Store unwashed bell peppers in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. They will stay fresh for about a week. Green bell peppers will stay typically fresh a little longer than the yellow and red ones.

A wonderful combination of tangy taste and crunchy texture, bell peppers are the Christmas ornaments of the vegetable world with their beautifully shaped glossy exterior that comes in a wide array of vivid colors ranging from green, red, yellow, orange, purple, brown to black. Sweet peppers are plump, bell-shaped vegetables featuring either three or four lobes. They usually range in size from 2 to 5 inches in diameter, and 2 to 6 inches in length. Inside the thick flesh is an inner cavity with edible bitter seeds and a white spongy core. Bell peppers are not 'hot'. They contain a recessive gene that eliminates capsaicin, the compound responsible for the 'hotness' found in other peppers.

Bell peppers, also known as sweet peppers, are like the Christmas ornaments of the vegetable world since they are beautifully shaped, glossy in appearance and come in a variety of vivid colors such as green, red, yellow, orange, purple, brown and black. Despite their varied palette, all are the same plant, known scientifically as *Capsicum annuum*, and are members of the nightshade family, which also includes potatoes, tomatoes and eggplant.

Sweet peppers are plump, bell shaped vegetables that usually feature either three or four lobes. There are also other varieties that have a more tapered shape and no distinguishing lobes. Sweet peppers usually range in size from two to five inches in diameter and two to six inches in length. Inside the thick flesh is an inner cavity with edible bitter seeds and a white spongy core.

Bell peppers have a delightful, slightly watery crunch. Green and purple peppers have a slightly bitter flavor, while the red, orange and yellows are sweeter and almost fruity. Pimento and paprika are both prepared from red bell peppers.

Like their relatives, the chili peppers, bell peppers originated in South America with seeds of a wild variety dating back to 5000 BC. Like many other foods native to this region, sweet peppers were carried throughout the world by the Spanish and Portuguese explorers who traveled through this continent. Due to the fact that bell peppers are very adaptable plants, being able to be grown in tropical and temperate climates, as well as very versatile foods, their cultivation and adoption into varying cuisines spread rapidly throughout many parts of the world. They have become a staple in central Europe where they are dried for paprika, a necessity for the flavor of Louisiana Creole dishes, and an integral ingredient in both Mexican and Portuguese cuisines. Currently, the main producers of sweet peppers are China, Turkey, Spain, Romania, Nigeria and Mexico.

Choose peppers that have deep vivid colors, taut skin, and that are free of soft spots, blemishes and darkened areas. Their stems should be green and fresh looking. Peppers should be heavy for their size and firm enough so that they will gently yield to slight pressure.

Bell peppers are a crop that lends themselves well to small-scale and part-time farming operations. Various markets exist for growers with small-acreage farms (those with less than 5 acres), and the multiple mature fruit colors (red, yellow, orange, purple, and brown) make it easier for growers to find niche markets. Peppers (*Capsicum annuum*), both sweet and hot, originated in Central and South America. Columbus found them growing in the West Indies, but they were not introduced into Europe until the 16th century. Jamaican farmers cultivated four types of hot peppers before 1770 (cherry, scotch bonnet, bell, and finger).

According to U.S. Department of Agriculture records, commercial bell peppers were first produced in the southern United States in 1925. Today, seed companies distribute several hundred varieties of both sweet and hot peppers. Growers generally plant approximately 10,000 to 14,000 plants per acre in double rows 14 to 18 inches apart on plastic-mulched beds.

Most bell peppers are hand harvested two to four times during the growing season. Mechanical harvesters are available for harvesting hot peppers, especially jalapeno, chilies, and hot cherries, with a once over harvest.

Cooling the peppers after harvest will remove field heat, which improves shelf life. Mild, sweet bell peppers have established themselves as staples in salads and as integral components of almost all sectors of American national and regional cuisine. In the last 5 years, U.S. consumption of peppers has increased, moving from an average of 12 pounds per person in 2001 to over 14 pounds in 2007. During that same time, consumption of bell peppers increased from 6.8 to 7.7 pounds.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the United States ranked fourth in pepper production in 2005. China, however, is by far, the largest producer, followed by Mexico and Turkey.

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