

GROW YOUR OWN CHILLIS

As chilli plants have tropical origins, they won't survive outdoors through the rigours of the winter. However, because of our relatively warm summers, they can be started off indoors and taken outside later in the year, where they will be most likely to produce a decent crop or even better crop in a greenhouse. Just remember they are frost-tender and require a minimum temperature of 10°C (50°F) and good amounts of sun to grow well.

Sowing:

Fill small pots or seed trays with a seed and cutting compost, available from any garden centre. Water them using a watering can with a fine sprinkler head, and wait about 10-15 minutes for the moisture to drain through before sowing your seeds. When you do, space them about 2.5cm (1in) apart, then cover the containers loosely with polythene to help retain moisture. Alternatively soak a jiffy plug in warm water until they expand and pop the seed into the top hole. They should then ideally be placed in a warm, light position, such as a windowsill. Once the seedlings are large enough to handle (at least 2 true leaves), transplant each one into an individual 8cm (3in) pot filled with standard potting compost. As long as you manage to keep the temperature warm enough, you'll find chillis are quite fast-growing once they're established. They can become heavy feeders as a result. For a truly bumper crop, you should also feed the young plants with a liquid feed such as Chilli Focus. Mix Chilli Focus at 5 ml (one teaspoon) per litre of water and apply to the plants weekly. If plants look pale feeding can be scaled up, increase frequency of feeding rather than strength of feed at this stage.

Potting On:

When the plants are 12–15 cm in height, they are ready to be moved into their final containers, depending on variety use 3, 4 or 5 litre pots. Plant them so that their roots are just below the surface and firm down the compost gently by watering it with a fine sprinkler head fixed to a watering can. If the compost settles, top up each pot until the surface is level and sits about 1 cm below the rim. You may 'Pinch out' the top tips of the plants by cutting them just above a leaf, to encourage further shoots to form and create a better overall shape, especially if they look like they are only going to grow a tall single stemmed plant. When large enough you will probably need to train them up canes using loops of string to support the branches with fruit on. Once flowering and fruiting is underway the feeding strength can be increased to 10 ml per litre at least weekly.

Harvesting:

Check your variety for the mature pod size and then as they reach full size, the pod should feel firm and look fairly glossy, if it still feels soft to the touch it is still immature. Pods can be picked early but they really need to be fully developed to reach their full flavour and heat. The best time to pick chillis for drying is just when they start to change colour. The picked chillis will continue to ripen even as they dry, totally green chillis may ripen to completely red after being picked. Picking will also stimulate the plant to produce more flowers and they will keep producing well into Autumn if climate conditions are right.

For more info visit: www.chillisgalore.co.uk