

Matt & Marina's Chilli Challenge

So, you want to win the chilli challenge and be the envy of all the other chilli-heads in the vicinity? Here's a few tips to get you started...

Ideally the best time to plant is January/February. This way, if you have a sunny windowsill or propagator you can give the seedlings a good head start before moving them outside after the risks of frosts have passed.

Alternatively, if you have sufficient windowsill space or a heated greenhouse then you can plant as early as you like and steal a march on the opposition.



For planting out the seeds I would strongly recommend a Jiffy 7 planter. Although more expensive than the alternatives I've found it offers a higher chance of germination and less risk of damaging the roots during transplanting.

A 12 plant propagator, complete with pellets should set you back less than £4 and is small enough to fit on the windowsill and keeps everything neat and tidy.

I tend to put a few holes in the lid of ours for increased air circulation but there is increased risk of them drying out so keep an eye on them.

If you plant into a seed tray or cells then plant the seeds about 5mm deep in sieved and lightly tamped compost. Multipurpose compost is fine, We've found the seed compost can be quite heavy and compact too easily. We have plenty of spare propagators and seed trays so if you'd like to borrow them then please let us know.

Once planted, give the seeds a good soak making sure you don't disturb the seeds.

Now the most important thing when propagating chillies is heat. Chilli seeds need a lot of heat to germinate, much higher than most other veg. 25-35 C is ideal, an airing cupboard or in a warm kitchen is ideal. We've had great success germinating ours on top of a warm aquarium, heated by the lights. Don't worry about sunlight at this stage, it's all about heat.



Once the seeds are sprouting it's time to get them into the sunshine. A window ledge is perfect for this although the seriously minded competitor could even resort to an LED or CFL grow lamp for additional light. A thin, spindly, 'leggy' plant is a sign of not enough light.

Turn them regularly so they don't lean too far one way. You can transplant them into bigger pots once the second set of leaves appear but don't be too keen to pot them on, if in doubt wait until you can see roots appearing from the base of the cell or pot.



When potting on chillies, don't be tempted to 'over-pot' and put them into a much larger pot. Chillies like to have their roots constricted and over potting will encourage them to put all their energy into developing roots rather than leaves and fruit. For their first pot we use plastic party cups and only pot them on from these when they reach 6" tall or so.

As they get larger, if they get too tall then pinching out the growing tips of the plant will encourage it to throw out more side shoots and waste less energy on growing tall.



As your chilli flowers then if you grow them indoors then you'll probably need to pollinate them by hand. Use a soft-bristled paintbrush and brush it around the inside of the flower to collect the pollen, transfer this to another flower and run the brush around the centre. Repeat this on all of the open flowers to maximise the pollination. If you notice a lot of flowers dropping off then is a sign of them not being pollinated.

If possible, water the plants with rainwater. If you have to use tap water then let it stand for at least a few hours to reach room temperature and for the chlorine to evaporate.

Feed the plant with tomato fertiliser to encourage fruiting – the newly formed fruit appear behind the flower and eventually push it off the plant. Plenty of sunlight and warmth is needed to make them ripen.

Chillies are used to hot temperatures and can cope with occasionally drying out. If the leaves start to droop then it's a reminder to water them again. Above all, don't let the roots stand in water as this will make them rot. If in doubt, drier is better than swamped.

If growing indoors, look out for greenfly as these will curl the leaves and cause the flowers to drop. Treat with a green soap mixture or an organic insecticide. Alternatively, a short spell outdoors or leaving by an open window will discourage the aphids as they don't like the cold breeze.



Above all, have fun, send us plenty of photos as they grow and we'll post them onto the website.

Have a look at my Blog for some trial and error tips on chilli growing, including a few DIY solutions. I'll try and keep it updated with news throughout the challenge: <http://chilliforest.blogspot.co.uk/>

Here's a list of some other useful links;

<http://www.southdevonchillifarm.co.uk/info/growing-chillies>

<http://www.chilliseeds.co.uk/>

<http://www.thechilliking.com/growing/growing-chilli-peppers-guide/>

<http://www.uptonchilli.co.uk/>

<http://www.greenhousesensation.co.uk/>

