

Capsicums and Chillies in the Alice Springs Region

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WHEN TO PLANT

Capsicums and chillies can be grown in the Alice Springs region during most of the year, although they are sensitive to frost and will need protection if grown in winter. In summer, plant capsicums and chillies in a spot which offers some shade for at least part of the day. Chillies can also be grown well in pots, which can be moved, if the plants are not growing well in their current location. A 20-cm pot will suffice for growing most chillies.



Capsicums



Chillies

VARIETIES

Capsicums and chillies come in a myriad of shapes, colours and sizes, as well as various heat intensities. Chillies can be used fresh, or dried for later use, when they reach their mature red colour. Capsicums can be harvested when the flesh changes from light green to dark green or, depending on the variety, they can stay on the plant until they turn red, orange or yellow. For current varieties, check with local nurseries.

SOIL PREPARATION

Prepare the ground before planting. Dig the soil to a sufficient depth so as to enable mixing with the compost or animal manure a few weeks before planting. That way, the organic matter added ahead of planting will have enough time to decay or decompose properly and will be ready to provide the nutrients for establishing plants. The depth should be adequate enough to give enough room for good establishment, growth and action of a healthy root system. Many nurseries sell products specifically for this purpose. Many seed packets will recommend adding lime to the soil before planting but due to the region's soil alkalinity, this need not be done.

FERTILISER

Depending on the current knowledge of the soil, assessed through proper testing, the plants can be provided with the required nutrients using a single nutrient fertiliser, a combined nutrient fertiliser or a mixed fertiliser starting before planting to top dressing whenever required in the production season. Complete granular NPK (nitrogen: phosphorus: potassium) fertiliser may be an easy way to start. However, there is a whole range of different types of fertiliser in the market and the choice depends on the objectives of conventional, minimal, complete organic, or biological farming. Once plants are established and begin to flower and fruit, apply a side-dressing fertiliser. A granular fertiliser can be applied and worked into the top couple of centimetres of soil, or a liquid fertiliser can be used. Excessive use of N will result in bushy plants with few fruits. It is advisable to use some calcium (Ca) foliar spray to supplement the Ca deficiency and avert possible blossom end rot. The foliar method of application is the most preferred way as it does not add to the alkaline pH of the local soil. Always follow the manufacturer's recommendations when applying fertilisers.

SEEDING AND PLANTING

Capsicums and chillies can be seeded directly into prepared ground or seedlings can be transplanted. Seeds should be planted 6 mm deep. Rows should be 50 to 60 cm apart and seedlings should be thinned to allow for a plant every 50 to 60 cm within the row. Seedlings should emerge in 10 to 14 days. When planting out seedlings, acclimatise them to the weather (harden-off) before placing them in the ground. Fruit should mature in 10 to 16 weeks.

WATERING

The seedbed should be moist at seeding and transplanting time. If seeding directly, try to keep the area moist until seedlings emerge. If transplanting, water the plants after planting and keep them well-watered until they have established. Regular watering in the late afternoon is recommended. The plant is getting adequate water if the area around the root zone is moist.

Drip irrigation is the most effective and economical means of watering. Uneven watering can lead to blossom end rot, a deficiency thought to be brought on by too little Ca getting to the plant. More information is available in Agnote I19 "Blossom End Rot".

MANAGEMENT

Stake the plants to keep them off the ground. Keep weeds in the vegetable patch to a minimum. Routinely check the plants for pests, diseases and deficiency symptoms. To reduce evaporation, keep weeds from germinating and reduce soil temperature, use mulch around the plants. Mulch with organic material, such as hay, or leaf or grass clippings, and dig this into the soil at the end of the growing season.

PESTS AND DISEASES

A good start with proper nutrition would see the plants growing healthy and eventually lead to very minimum insect infestation. Commonly, capsicums and chillies are not seen to be affected by many pests and diseases in the Alice Springs region. In case of an aphid infestation, control it with specific systemic insecticides sprayed at the recommended dosage and time of day. Check with the Entomology Section of the Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries for an appropriate chemical control, or refer to www.pestinfo.nt.gov.au.

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