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Capsicum annuum: Ornamental Pepper[1]

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Introduction

Ornamental pepper (*Capsicum annuum*) is an herbaceous tender perennial that is grown as a warm season annual in frost-prone hardiness zones. This plant has a rounded growth habit, and may acheive a height of 1 to 4 feet, and reaches a spread of 1 foot (Figure 1). The leaves are lanceolate and green, purple, or black depending on cultivar selection (Figure 2). Flowers are small white to purple in coloration and are generally considered inconspicuous (Figure 3). This species is notable for its colorful and showy fruits (Figure 4). The fruit is a 1- to 3-inch-long berry, which varies in shape and size depending on cultivar. Colors range from black, red, orange, yellow, green, and white. Several colors are often seen at the same time on plants as the fruits ripen and change color. While the peppers are said to be edible, they are generally not eaten as the flavor can be unpredictable. Avoid using these plants where young children could come into contact with them as the fruits can be irritating if eaten or handled.

In warmer climates, ornamental peppers are perennial and one of the best bedding plants for hot weather conditions, performing beautifully as a groundcover in mixed flower borders, as an edging, or in containers. Ornamental pepper makes a dramatic mass planting, is resistant to herbivores, and attracts several species of birds. Even though they can be perennial in USDA hardiness zones 9B through 11B, plants are usually changed out at the end of the season.

Figure 1. Full form—*Capsicum annuum*: ornamental pepper.
Credit: Rose Guinther via Adobe Stock

Figure 2. Leaf—*Capsicum annuum*: ornamental pepper.
Credit: © plantperson7654, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC) via iNaturalist

Figure 3. Flower—*Capsicum annuum*: ornamental pepper.
Credit: Sinaloa Silvestre, no rights reserved (CC0) via iNaturalist

Figure 4. Fruit—*Capsicum annuum*: ornamental pepper.
Credit: Trygve via Adobe Stock

General Information

Scientific name: *Capsicum annuum*

Pronunciation: KAP-sick-um AN-yoo-um

Common name(s): ornamental pepper, bush red pepper, Christmas pepper, chili pepper

Family: *Solanaceae*

Plant type: annual; tender perennial

USDA hardiness zones: all zones (Figures 5 and 6)

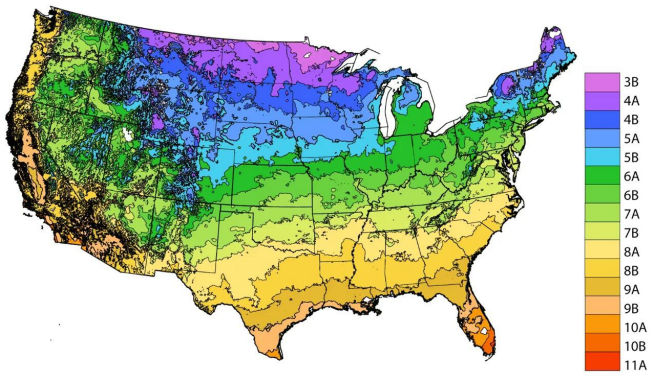

Figure 5. Shaded area represents potential planting zone—USDA Hardiness Zones 3B–11A; 11B within planting zone but not pictured on map.
Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/ for specific zone information.

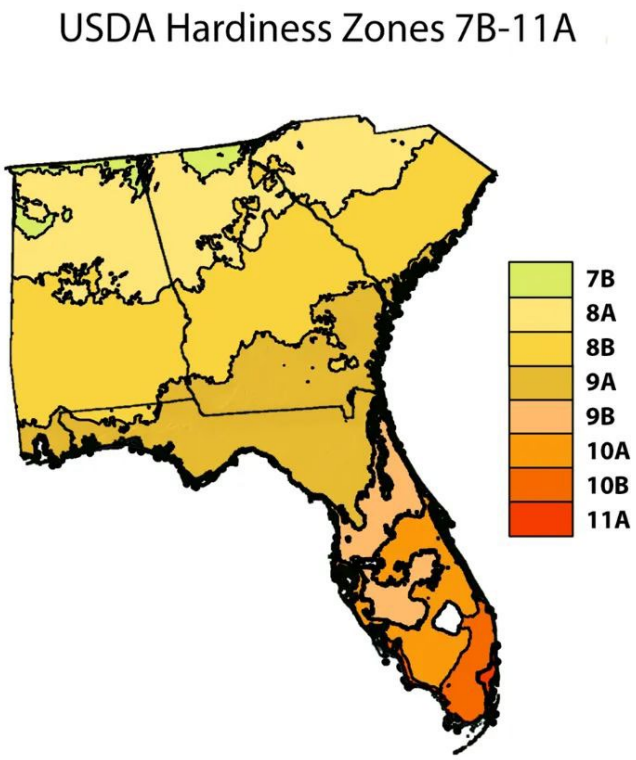

Figure 6. Shaded area represents potential planting zone in the SE Region—USDA Hardiness Zones 7B–11A; 11B within planting zone but not pictured on map.
Credit: This map is based on the 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Visit for specific zone information.

Planting month for zone 7: Jun; Jul

Planting month for zone 8: May; Jun

Planting month for zone 9: Mar; Apr; May; Sep; Oct

Planting month for zones 10 and 11: Feb; Mar; Apr; May; Oct; Nov; Dec

Origin: native to parts of North America

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Uses: container or above-ground planter; mass planting; border

Availability: generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

Description

Height: 1 to 4 feet

Spread: 6 inches to 1 foot

Plant habit: round

Plant density: dense

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: ovate

Leaf venation: bowed

Leaf type and persistence: not applicable

Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: not applicable

Fall characteristic: not applicable

Flower

Flower color: white; purple

Flower characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: elongated

Fruit length: 3 to 6 inches

Fruit cover: fleshy

Fruit color: orange; white; yellow; red; green; black; purple

Fruit characteristic: persists on the plant; showy; may cause irritation

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: not applicable

Current year stem/twig color: green

Current year stem/twig thickness: thick

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in full sun

Soil tolerances: slightly acidic; slightly alkaline; clay; sand; loam

Soil salt tolerances: unknown

Plant spacing: 6 to 12 inches

Other

Roots: not applicable

Winter interest: not applicable

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

Use and Management

Ornamental pepper should be located in full sun. It is adaptable to any well-drained soil but does best in an acidic to slightly neutral pH. Flowers appear during the late spring and summer, followed by the brightly colored fruit. The peppers will persist on the plant until the first frost, where the plant will be killed back. Various cultivar selections are available with different growth forms, disease resistance, and pepper colors and shapes. This plant is heat and drought tolerant. Pinching the new growth of this plant will encourage lateral growth, and result in a fuller specimen. Plant on a 12- to 18-inch center for a mass planting effect.

Propagation is by seed, which should not be covered with soil.

Design Considerations

Ornamental Pepper is prized for its vivid, long-lasting fruit, which ripens through a kaleidoscope of purple, black, red, and orange, often displaying multiple colors at once. Its compact, mounded form provides neat structure, while the glossy, beadlike peppers add bold texture. Best in full sun and well-drained soil, it excels as a front-of-border edging, in massed seasonal displays, or as a vibrant accent in containers and foundation beds.

For companion plantings, use contrasting colors and textures. Create a fiery, heat-loving scheme with orange marigolds and red zinnias or opt for a cool contrast by setting the peppers against the blues of Plumbago or Angelonia. To make the fruit pop with foliage pair dark-leaved varieties like 'Black Pearl' with chartreuse sweet potato vine, or use silvery dusty miller as a cooling backdrop. Finally, soften the pepper's bold form with the fine, airy texture of ornamental grasses like purple fountain grass or muhly grass.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern except for occasional leaf-chewing insects.

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