

Sow tomatoes and peppers in February

Slow-growing tomatoes, peppers, chillies and aubergine should be sown in February, even in Scotland.

The young seedlings require warmth and careful attention, so must be grown in a greenhouse.

In Scotland, always choose varieties that are described as 'quick growing'. In this country, we have lower temperatures and fewer hours of sunlight than Eastbourne, so we need quick growers to be sure of a crop. Peppers, cordon tomatoes, bush tomatoes, chillies and aubergines must all be grown in a greenhouse, conservatory or possibly on a windowsill. Even bush tomatoes need a favoured spot in the west or a good summer to grow well outside.

Tomatoes, *Lycopersicon esculentum*, need a germinating and growing temperature of 15°C - 18°C. Fill a seed tray with a seed sowing growing medium or a low nutrient home-made compost mix; water, and then very thinly place the seed; cover with a fine layer of compost. They germinate best in the dark, so put the tray in a bag, or even the airing cupboard till germination. Prick out the seedlings after 2-3 weeks. Thoroughly soak the tray so you can tease the plants apart without damaging the roots and move into 13cm pots filled with a general purpose growing medium or a home-made compost mix. Make a hole with a pencil, deeply sink the seedling and gently tamp down the compost. Let the plant grow on steadily in a 15-18°C temperature, keeping moist, but not exposed to strong sunlight.

Sweet peppers, *Capsicum frutescens*, and chillies, *Capsicum annuum*, require higher temperatures: 21-22°C, but they will tolerate a low of 18°C or a high of 28°C. You do make life easier for yourself by choosing an F1 like 'Bendigo'. I've found this variety has stood the test of a filthy summer. Another good F1 is 'Bell Boy', and the long, conical fruits of 'Doux Long des Landes' will even turn red during a poor season.

Seedsmen are mean with F1s – you might only get 5 seeds in a pack. Spread thinly, 2cm apart, but unlike tomatoes, the seeds need light: make sure the propagator cover is sparkling clean. Prick out into 8cm pots, planting deeply as for tomatoes. When the pepper completely fills the pot, with its roots beginning to come out the bottom, move to a larger pot, ending up with a 10ltr one. Pot bound peppers will put their energies into producing better fruits. English writers often suggest you'll get more fruits by nipping off the growing shoot when a plant is 30cm tall. This slows down growth, so should not be done in Scotland. The plants are prone to rotting easily, so, if using a pot saucer, empty it after watering to prevent waterlogging.

Chillies are closely related to sweet peppers and are treated in much the same way, so must also be kept in the greenhouse. The alternative with some of the more attractive varieties is to treat them like a houseplant. Enjoy 'Filius Blue', with blue-tinged leaves and a midway bluish-purple colour or that amazing gem, 'Prairie Fire' with its fruits pointing upwards through the foliage, turning from lemon to orange and finally red.

The trickiest of these February sowings are aubergines, *Solanum melongena*. Although they share the same growing temperature as tomatoes, 18-20°C, unlike tomatoes, none of the varieties can be grown outside in Scotland. You sow them as you would peppers, thinly sowing twice as many seeds as the number of plants you need. They germinate in 10-14 days, and, if you use a large seed tray, there should be enough nutrient and space for them to grow on till the second true leaves appear. Unlike peppers, though, they should be grown on without becoming pot-bound or in any way checked, till finally being put in a 15ltr pot. Aubergines,

unlike peppers, do best in a humid atmosphere and must also be kept moist, but not waterlogged. They're a welcome addition to any greenhouse.

I know this might all seem a bit complicated, but it's worth getting the basic rules right to avoid heartache later! Provided you've got a propagator and greenhouse, growing these wonderful summer fruits only takes up 15 or 20 minutes at a time, largely because you need very few plants. 2 or 3 chillies and bush tomatoes, and a couple of sweet peppers and aubergines will probably suffice. The only tie is that you or a neighbour must always be on hand with a watering can and bottle of liquid feed.