



## **HOW TO GROW THE BEST CAPSICUMS** BY JULIA HANCOCK

### **HOW TO BUY**

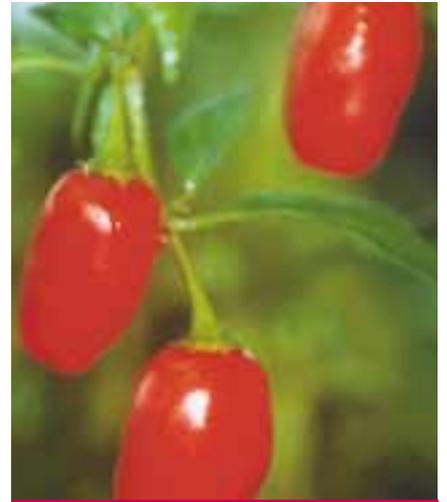
Capsicums are one of those multi-function vegetables that most cooks can't do without. They are delicious raw in salads (where their vitamin C content is consumed fresh, yielding maximum effect); they add a sweet piquancy to casseroles, soups and salsas; they can be stuffed, steamed, stir-fried or roasted; and they are irresistible when sun-dried or pickled in relishes.

Capsicums can be purchased as seed or seedlings from mid spring to late summer and the good news is that you only need a few plants because once they get established they are very prolific producers of fruits. There are many different varieties of sweet capsicums now available including 'California Wonder', 'Sweet Mixed' and 'Yolo Wonder'. Capsicums can be eaten when still green or allowed to ripen to red (or yellow depending on type), whichever is preferred.

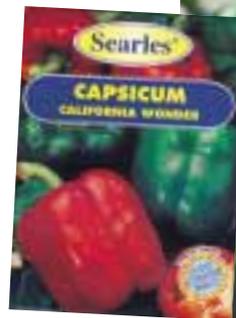
### **WHERE TO PLANT**

Capsicums are highly decorative vegetables so can be planted in among annual and perennial flowers in a cottage garden or permaculture set-up if desired. The main thing to remember when planting them is that they like heat and so should be positioned in the hottest part of the garden. To prevent the heavily-laden mature plants from blowing over, capsicums develop an extensive root system so their planting position has to be in a bed which contains soil deep enough to anchor them. Capsicums also make excellent pot plants, providing the container is large enough to enable them to develop fully.

A word of warning: capsicums belong to the Solanacea family (which also includes eggplants, potatoes and tomatoes) and they should not be planted in soil where these species have recently been grown in case it has been contaminated with the soil-borne diseases that are associated with this family.



*Capsicums are heat-loving plants, so plant them in the hottest part of the garden*



*Capsicums are well suited in pots.*



## HOW TO PLANT

Capsicums prefer neutral to slightly alkaline conditions, so apply lime to acid soils at the recommended rate, water well in and allow to settle for two weeks before planting. Seeds can be sown directly into garden beds, but make sure the soil has been dug over well and enriched with compost, such as **Searles 5 IN 1<sup>®</sup> Plus**, so the young roots can penetrate it easily. Mix in some **Searles Robust<sup>®</sup> Plus Controlled Release Fertiliser** at the recommended rate, and give the bed a long soak before planting. The same preparation principles apply to planting seedlings, which should be approximately 10cm high before they go into open ground. If you live in a windy area or have selected one of the taller varieties, place a stake next to each seedling to support it as it grows. Capsicums grown in containers should be planted in top quality potting mix, such as **Searles Herb & Vegetable Potting Mix**, and staked. Keep newly-planted seedlings moist until they become established. As capsicums are a summer crop the soil around them should be protected with a light mulch to cut down on water loss.



## HOW TO MAINTAIN

Capsicums require regular watering if they are to develop the sweet, juicy fruits for which they are renowned. It is also a good idea to scatter some granular fertiliser around the plants at six weekly intervals. Regular harvesting will ensure a succession of fruits; use secateurs to sever the fruit from the stem to avoid pulling at the plant.

In frost-free climates capsicums can be treated as perennial plants and cut back after fruiting has finished in late autumn, to shoot again the following spring. Very often the second year's crop is even better than the first. Remove any weeds from among your plants as they appear. Pot-grown capsicums should be fed fortnightly with a combination of **Searles Fish & Kelp Plus<sup>®</sup>** and **Searles Flourish<sup>®</sup>**, and never be allowed to completely dry out.



## PESTS AND DISEASES

Although capsicums love the heat, direct sun on the fruits can cause sunburn, which shows as a withered, mushy spots on the outer surface. If necessary, screen the ripening fruits by hiding them behind foliage until they're ready for picking. Few pests and diseases affect capsicums although fruit fly may be a problem in some areas. Harvesting the fruit as soon as it is ripe enough to do so foils their activities. To avoid the spread of soil-borne diseases such as wilt, mildew and stem rot practice crop rotation on a four-yearly basis.

**Bonus point:** Hot chillies can be grown in exactly the same way as capsicums and even if you don't like eating them yourself, they make an excellent insecticide when ground up, mixed with water and sprayed on affected plants.