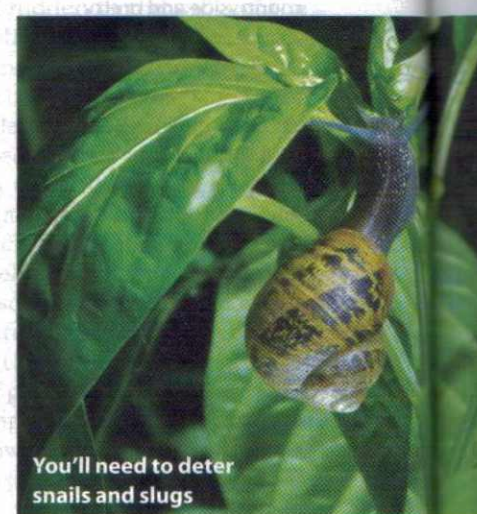


It's much more  
rewarding to grow  
plants from seed



A chili plant  
in flower



You'll need to deter  
snails and slugs

# GROW YOUR OWN CHILLIES

Chillies have a unique and often unquantifiable appeal that extends beyond just being a cooking ingredient and encompasses gardening, culture and even machismo. This attraction leads many of us, even the less green-fingered, to want to grow them.

Their visual appeal alone is enough to make them attractive companions, and some people grow them for that reason alone. Whatever your reason for wanting to cultivate chillies, there are a few simple guidelines that will help you along the way.

## ORIGINS

All chillies descend from wild species that grew, or grow, in Central and South America or the Caribbean, so whether we cultivate them in a greenhouse, the garden or indoors, we must do our best

to mimic the warm, bright conditions in which they thrive. We can buy seedlings in garden centres, but I find it so much more rewarding to grow plants from seed, and that is where we will start.

## CHOOSING SEEDS

Buy seeds in early spring, think about where they are going to live, and read the small print. Generally the hotter ones will take longer to mature and will need constant warmth from March to September. Milder ones will usually grow quicker and might live outside in a good summer. Also remember that big fruits will grow on big plants – will you have space for something over 4ft (1.2m) high?

## PLANTING

Start in March and sow them in small pots of seed compost, ¼in (6mm) below

the surface. Keep them warm, preferably 75F–85F (24C–30C) and slightly moist. They should emerge in 10 to 14 days and as soon as they do they will need plenty of light. A south-facing window is best, but if they have emerged in shade and already started to grow spindly, don't introduce them into strong sunlight for more than a few minutes at first.

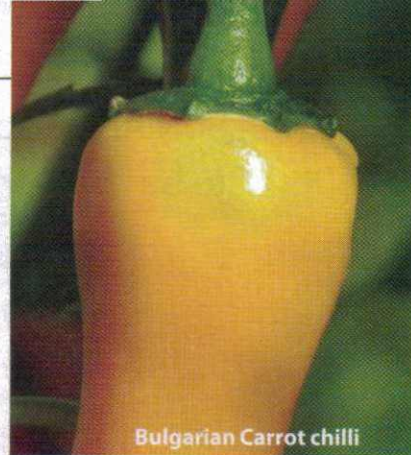
## WARMTH AND LIGHT

By early April you should have a short, strong, green sprout with four or six leaves. From now on, your chili plants will flourish and grow quickly if they are given the right conditions, but if conditions are bad they will stagnate. A temperature of 75F–85F (24C–30C) during the day is perfect, but they don't necessarily need fierce sunshine all the time. Always think about light levels as





The perfect shiny red chillies



Bulgarian Carrot chilli



The mild Ancho Poblano



Mixed Habanero chillies

## Cultivating your own crop of delicious, sizzling chillies in Britain really is easy-peasy, says expert Jason Nickels

well as temperature: a sunny window, greenhouse or conservatory is perfect, but anything darker and they will start to grow weak and topple over.

Cold spring nights, and wind or rain, will stop them in their tracks, but by May they can go outside in good weather, although they need to be substantial plants before they will thrive outdoors in anything but a heat wave.

### REPOTTING

As you have started your plants in small pots you will need to think about moving them up into bigger ones as they grow. For most varieties you should aim to have them in 9in-10in (23cm-25cm) pots, though some dwarf varieties will not need that space.

Once the plants are in bigger pots you need to keep them moist, but do not

let them sit in water. Feed your plants with a liquid chilli or tomato plant feed, weekly to start with but more frequently once they flower and the fruits start to set, usually around early June.

### HARVESTING

All chillies will change colour as they mature; most start green and turn to red but there are many other colour combinations. With most types you don't need to wait until they reach their final colour to pick them.

You will notice that they turn from being slightly waxy and soft to firm and shiny, and you might feel a crunch inside if you give them a squeeze. This indicates that the seeds, the heat and the flavour will have formed and they are ready to pick. If you harvest them young at this stage, you will get a much bigger crop

than if you leave them in longer to change colour.

### THE AUTUMN

Try to maximise your crop by keeping plants as warm as possible into October. This probably means bringing them indoors if they aren't already, as even a greenhouse will be too cold. If you have the right spot and a healthy plant, it may well carry on fruiting until Christmas. ■

♦ *Growing Chillies: A Guide To The Domestic Cultivation Of Chilli Plants* by Jason Nickels is illustrated with 112 colour photos and available online, priced £11.99. If you have any questions on chilli growing, ask Jason on Twitter @jasonnickels  
**Sarah Langton-Lockton's gardening column returns next week**