

Friday's Feature

By

Theresa Friday

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Spice up your landscape with ornamental peppers

Looking for a hot landscape plant? Try ornamental pepper. Ornamental peppers are compact plants, reaching ten to twenty inches in height. Their size, interesting foliage, and attractive fruit make them ideal plants for a container garden or at the front of a border. You can also use them as a groundcover.

Ornamental peppers produce colorful fruits from late spring through fall. The fruits come in a range of colors including red, purple, yellow, and orange. Many varieties also have interesting and attractive foliage, including variegated forms.



You can plant ornamental peppers several times during the year. Many people plant in mid-spring and enjoy the colorful foliage and fruit all the way through the fall until the first killing frost. It is also popular, and widely accepted, to plant ornamental peppers in mid- to late summer (July – September) for a nice color addition to the fall landscape.

These plants are easy to maintain. They do best in full sun. Soil pH is not critical, but slightly acid conditions (5.5-6.0) are most preferable. Chose a spot with well drained soil and irrigate during dry spells. Space plants according to the mature size for the variety chosen. When planting in the spring, fertilize at planting and again at a half rate in early to mid-summer. When planting in mid- or late summer, a fertilization at planting will normally last through the fall.

A few of my favorite varieties include Chilly Chili (an All-America Selection in 2002), Medusa and Black Pearl. There are, however, many new and exciting varieties to try.

Chilly Chili is a compact ornamental pepper that produces a heavy load of mild, two-inch long, erect chilies. The chilies start green, and then change through chartreuse and orange on their way to a deep, waxy red. Because the plant is indeterminate in its growth habit, it has fruit in all stages of development and gives a



handsome blend of colors throughout the summer and fall. The indeterminate growth habit means that plants will have fruit on display from July until frost, with the plant gaining beauty as the season progresses.

Medusa is a consistent performer and unique with the 'snaky Medusa hairdo' peppers in colors ranging and changing from ivory to yellow to orange to bright red. I've had this pepper return each year in my garden from seed that fell the previous season.

Black Pearl is famous for its deep purple, almost black leaves. The compact, upright plants bear distinctive semi-glossy, deep purple to black leaves, complemented with scores of shiny round black-purple "pearls" of fruit that

mature to bright red. Like most peppers, it's edible, though VERY hot. This plant withstands high heat and humidity.

All ornamental peppers are very heat-tolerant and will make a great addition to the late-summer and fall landscape along the Gulf Coast.

Despite their name, many ornamental peppers are edible and tasty. But many are very spicy and very hot. People without a sturdy palate will enjoy just looking at them. Medusa and Chilly Chili bear non-burning, "child-safe" fruit, making them ideal for indoor and outdoor use in both public and residential areas once thought unsuitable for the traditional "too-hot-to-handle" ornamental peppers.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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