

Ornamental peppers may add spice to your landscape

In today's article, Theresa Friday, UF/IFAS Extension Agent in Santa Rosa County, tells you how to spice up your landscape with ornamental peppers.

Ornamental peppers produce fruits from late spring through fall with colors that range from red, purple, yellow and orange. Many varieties have attractive foliage.

Many people plant ornamental peppers in mid-spring and enjoy the colorful foliage and fruit until the first killing frost. Ornamental peppers can be planted in mid- to late summer (July – September) for a nice color addition to the fall landscape.

Plants grow best in full sun and are easy to maintain. A slightly acid soil pH (5.5-6.0) is preferable. Choose 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 spring, fertilize at planting and again at a half rate in early to mid-summer. When planting in mid- or late summer, fertilization at planting will normally last through fall.

A few of my favorite varieties include Chilly Chili, Medusa and Black Pearl. There many other 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 change through chartreuse and orange on their way to a deep, waxy red. The plant will have fruit in all stages of development and gives a blend of colors throughout the summer and fall.

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.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, April 30, 2009