

SUSTAINABLE FOOD GUIDE:

BELL PEPPERS

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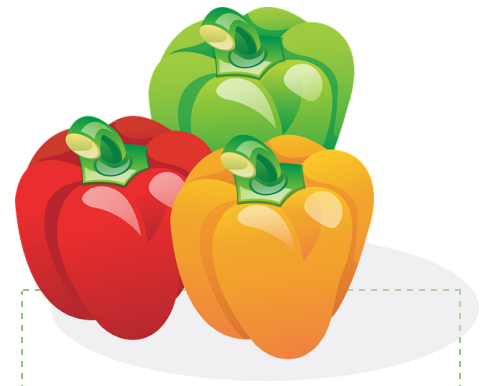
Meet The Bell Pepper

Bell peppers are incredibly common vegetables (although *technically* fruits) which are used in a variety of dishes due to their flavor and versatility. Bell peppers originate from Central and South America, and have been spreading throughout the world since the late 1400s (Bell, 2008). Most commonly, Bell peppers are green, red, yellow or orange (Bell, 2008). Green Bell peppers are unripe, whilst the other variations are mature, with colors which depend on which cultivar of the plant is being grown (Bell, 2008). As Bell peppers mature, their nutrient content increases, making the green peppers a bit less vitamin-packed than the others (Amarson, 2015). Still, Bell peppers contain very large amounts of minerals and vitamins, especially vitamin C (Amarson, 2015). They also contain large amounts of vitamin B6, E, and A, as well as potassium (Amarson, 2015). Aside from differing nutrient values, unripe green peppers and ripened peppers differ in taste. Green Bell peppers are more bitter, whereas the others are more sweet.

Consider Our Current Food System

The easiest way to obtain Bell peppers is, of course, to run to the nearest supermarket and head to the produce section. However, the U.S. food system creates issues that all consumers should think about when shopping, in order to help inform their decisions. In the United States, large-scale farming operations make up 2% of all farms, while producing around 35% of our crops (U.S., 2015). These large-scale farms rely on chemical fertilizers and pesticides to protect their high yielding monocultures, which has many negative environmental impacts. Once produce hits the shelves, they are priced accordingly- but do not include the *externalized* costs of our agricultural system, including environmental damage, and social issues brought forth by inadequate food availability and dispersal (U.S., 2015).

Another issue with the U.S. food system is that our system for growing crops results in a lower nutritional value of food, including Bell peppers. This occurs because increased fertilizer use, and other modern day practices result in less minerals being taken up by plants (Long, 2009). Additionally, breeding crops for high



A RECESSIVE GENE IN BELL PEPPERS

REMOVES **CAPSAICIN**,
WHICH MAKES OTHER PEPPERS **HOT**.



BELL PEPPERS ARE A PART OF THE
nightshade
FAMILY.



A **RED BELL PEPPER** HAS

253%

DAILY RECOMMENDED VALUE OF

Vitamin C

A **GREEN BELL PEPPER** HAS

159%

DAILY RECOMMENDED VALUE.

yields can affect nutritional quality (Long, 2009). Despite this issue, Bell peppers are still great to implement in one's diet, especially if a consumer chooses peppers from the correct places. In short, *eat organic and eat local!* By doing this, consumers support small scale agriculture, and more sustainable farming practices without as many externalities. Consumers will also enjoy fresh produce with the most vitamin and mineral content, next to eating it straight from the plant.

Let's Support Local: Communiversity Gardens

One of the aforementioned local places to source Bell peppers from is Northern Illinois University's very own Communiversity Gardens, or one of the locations to which they deliver produce. The Communiversity Gardens were started in the spring of 2014, and is part of the larger Dekalb County Community Gardens (DCCG), a who provides funding, as well as NIU, who provides the land. The Communiversity Gardens also partners with the Husky Food Pantry which services many students. Because the Communiversity Gardens offer credit to some students as they work, a number of student projects have made (or soon will make) their way into the overall layout of the garden. These projects include a new system for numbering and labeling beds, increased vertical gardening, straw bale gardening, Mason bee homes, weed management in pathways, and a perennial keyhole plot.

According to Melissa Burlingame, who runs the garden this operation is incredibly important because it "encourages students to work together and allows them to give back in a meaningful way." She further explained that "this generation is interested in community service and [working in the Communiversity Gardens] gives them an opportunity to do so, while giving back to the community."

The university gardens is familiar with growing organic Bell peppers, as volunteers were able to produce green peppers in abundance in previous seasons. Due to their high demand, the Community Gardens will continue to do so into the future.

Consumer's Guide: Buying Bell Peppers

After a good source for your produce is located, choosing the proper Bell pepper is quite simple. All varieties of Bell peppers should appear shiny, and be free of wrinkles, bruises, or rotting. Each pepper should be felt (carefully) to ensure a firm texture. Green Bell peppers tend to be cheaper than that of other colors because they are unripe, and require less time and resources to grow than those that are left in the field to age (Foster, 2016).

Once home, Bell peppers can be stored in the fridge for



COMMUNIVERSITY GARDENS HAS

ONLY **2** PAID STAFF MEMBERS,

BUT MORE THAN **600**

VOLUNTEERS PUT IN OVER

1000 HOURS

OF WORK THROUGH THE PREVIOUS

GROWING SEASON.



THIS HARD WORK RESULTED IN

donations OF ALMOST

1800 lbs

OF PRODUCE.



longevity. Green Bell peppers will last longer than ripened peppers, although it is recommended that they be eaten within a week. Sometimes, green Bell peppers last up to 2 weeks when refrigerated, but fresher is always better.

Grow Your Own Bell Peppers

If purchasing Bell peppers is not interesting to you, consider growing your own! To plant Bell peppers, purchase seeds (seeds from supermarket varieties may not yield a plant), and soak them in warm water for a few hours until they no longer float (Didier, 2016). Plant seeds ¼ inches deep in a potting tray with good drainage, and keep them warm as they begin to grow (Didier, 2016). Bell peppers require soil to be 75-90 degrees Fahrenheit or more, so placing them in sunny place, or under a grow light, is vital (Didier, 2016). Keep the soil moist, but not sopping wet, and watch your plant begin to grow (Didier, 2016). Once your plant has 2 sets of fully grown leaves, it is time to transplant your Bell peppers. Keep your plants a foot or two apart for easy harvesting, or place each pepper in a separate container that is at *least* 16 inches deep (Didier, 2016). An inexpensive option is to purchase food grade 2-5 gallon buckets, fill them with compost, and transplant up to 2 peppers per bucket. Regardless of how you plant them, make sure that your Bell pepper plants receive a lot of sun, and water them regularly. Adding compost will help your peppers grow and stay healthy. Once your plant produces fruit, you can harvest them while green, or let them stay on the plant longer to ripen.

Cooking With Bell Peppers: Spanish Quinoa Stuffed Peppers

If you are short on ideas of exactly what to do with your fresh Bell peppers, Spanish quinoa stuffed peppers is a delicious place to start. To prepare this dish you will need:

1 cup of quinoa, 2 cups of vegetable stock (or water), 4 large Bell peppers (any color), ½ cup salsa, 2 teaspoons of cumin powder, 1 ½ teaspoons chili powder, 1 ½ teaspoon garlic powder, 1 15-ounce can of black beans (drained), 1 cup whole kernel corn (drained), & salt (to taste). You can also top your stuffed peppers with sliced avocado, lime juice, cilantro, diced red onion, additional salsa, or hot sauce.

To begin, cook your quinoa in the vegetable broth by boiling over high heat, then simmering until the liquid is gone. Cut your Bell peppers in half and remove the seeds, then brush them with an oil of your choice (such as coconut oil). Place the peppers on an oiled baking sheet and set aside as you prepare the remainder of your dish (you should also preheat your oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit). In a large bowl, mix your finished quinoa, salsa, corn, black beans, and seasonings, then mix well. Stuff this mixture into



STAKING BELL PEPPER PLANTS
CAN GIVE THEM EXTRA SUPPORT
IF THEY ARE GETTING
TALL & HEAVY



BELL PEPPERS PREFER
full sunlight
AND
warm temperatures



THIS RECIPE IS
VEGAN
&
GLUTEN FREE

the halved peppers and cover with aluminum foil. Bake the stuffed peppers for 30 minutes, then uncover and cook at 400 degrees fahrenheit for another 20 minutes. After removing them from the oven, you can top them with avocados, onions, etc., and enjoy!

This recipe is from *Minimalistbaker.com* (2015) and serves 4.

Final Tips For Consumers:

Bell peppers are a wonderful vegetable to add to your grocery list, or garden, and are widely available in a variety of locations. Consumers should try to buy local, volunteer in gardens or farms in their area, and read up on sustainable agriculture to learn more about the food system and how it affects their foods. If you are not already, get involved in your community and keep up with the policies that affect the food you eat. And of course, the best way to get close to produce is to work with it yourself! Encorporate Bell peppers into your garden, or help others cultivate it in theirs.

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