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Plants on Your Plate—Peppers

Red, yellow or green...sweet, spicy or hot...fresh, roasted or pickled. There is so much variety among peppers and their preparation methods; it is no wonder that Peter Piper picked a peck!

While most people commonly think of peppers (genus *Capsicum*) as vegetables, they are actually fruits, and a member of the botanical family *Solanaceae*. Spices derived from peppers, such as chili powder and paprika are also in this family. A common name for this botanical group is nightshades, which may not have the best reputation in some circles. Nightshades contain alkaloids, which is dangerous in high concentration as evidenced in other family members like belladonna and tobacco.

This negative association, unfortunately, often flows over to other nightshade vegetables like potatoes, tomatoes, eggplant, as well as peppers, all of which are abundant in many nutrients. Some sources may associate nightshades with an inflammatory response in the body; however; there is not a significant body of research supporting this theory. Food sensitivities are very individualistic and people with certain autoimmune disorders may find that nightshade vegetables exacerbate individual symptoms.

For most people there is no reason to avoid nightshades like peppers. They are a rich source of Vitamin C, vitamin K, folate and potassium. Green peppers are considered under-ripe and will have a more bitter taste than a red pepper. There are also yellow, orange and purple

varieties that have similar nutrient profiles, differing mostly within the phytonutrients they provide based on their color family. Because red bell peppers are also a decent source of iron, it is well absorbed because of the high Vitamin C value.

Another big difference among peppers is the heat factor, which comes from the phytonutrients known as capsaicinoids, which have shown benefits to heart health. The heat from capsaicinoids often results in people using less salt; therefore helping to lower blood pressure. Capsaicinoids may also improve cholesterol values and blood vessel function.

The heat of a pepper is measured using Scoville units: The scale ranges from zero (as in bell peppers) all the way to 3,000,000 (as in the spiciest chile in the world, the Pepper X). The Scoville scale is a good base for knowing how hot your peppers are, but know that the heat can vary according to climate and vegetation. The relatively mild poblano (or ancho) pepper weighs in at about 1,500 (SHU), while the super-hot habañero packs a whopping 250,000 SHUs!

Because peppers are mostly water, they will wrinkle and dehydrate as they age, so select firm unwrinkled fruits that feel heavy for their size. Store unwashed bell peppers in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for up to a week. Green bell peppers will stay fresh a little longer than yellow or red ones. If you have an abundant crop, peppers can also be frozen or pickled and you can find instructions on the Seasonal and Simple app or the website at <https://seasonalandsimple.info/>

One of my very favorite uses for peppers is stuffed peppers. There are as many versions of this recipe as there are people, but the recipe below has become one of my favorites. While most recipes use bell peppers, this one is also good with poblano peppers (sliced lengthwise and seeded) if you want it a little spicier!

Southwest Stuffed Peppers

- 1 cup brown rice
- ½ cup chopped onion
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin or chili powder
- 1 can (15 oz.) black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 cup salsa
- 4 bell peppers (choose any color)

1 large tomato, sliced
½ cup shredded reduced fat cheddar cheese

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Cook rice according to package directions and set aside. Cut a slice off the tops of peppers and remove seeds, set aside. Chop the removed pepper tops into small pieces. Heat oil in a medium non-stick skillet. Add onions, garlic and chopped peppers and sauté until tender. Add cumin, beans, rice and salsa; stir to combine. Stuff bean and rice filling into peppers and place peppers upright into baking dish. Top peppers with a slice of tomato. Bake for 20 minutes. Remove peppers from oven and sprinkle each with 2 tablespoons shredded cheese. Return to oven for 5 -10 minutes, until cheese is melted.

Nutrition information: Calories: 332, Total Fat: 8g, Saturated Fat: 3g, Sodium: 455mg, Carbohydrates: 56g, Fiber: 6.5g, Protein: 11.5g

Recipe adapted from Seasonal and Simple, analyzed by verywellfit.com



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