**Capsicum annuum L. ‘Black Pearl’**

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Considerable diversity exists in *Capsicum* L. germplasm for fruit, leaf shape, size and color, as well as plant habit. This morphological diversity, together with diverse ripe fruit color and varying hues of green to purple and variegated foliar pigmentation, affords myriad opportunities to develop unique cultivars for ornamental applications. When introduced to Europe in the 15th century, peppers were held in higher esteem as an ornamental plant than as a food source. Ornamental peppers as a potted or bedding plant and a florist crop are still popular today in Europe and are gaining in popularity in the United States (Armitage and Hamilton, 1987; Bosland, 1999). Ornamental peppers were long known as Christmas peppers (Hammer, 1980). Christmas peppers bearing brightly colored fruit were the most popular Christmas gift plant until about the 1960s, at which time the poinsettia industry began to promote and introduce new, improved cultivars that have made poinsettia the number one Christmas gift plant (Stommel and Bosland, 2005).

Attributes of ornamental pepper include easy seed propagation, a relatively short cropping time, heat and drought tolerance, and excellent keeping quality (Stommel and Bosland, 2005). These attributes, together with the morphological diversity available in *Capsicum*, also make ornamental peppers ideal for use as bedding plants because they offer vibrant fruit and foliage colors through the summer and fall seasons. Ornamental peppers have become a profitable crop for greenhouse pot plant and transplant production and an innovative way for small farmers to produce a high-value alternative crop.

A growing demand exists for dark purple to black pigmented landscape and garden plants (Armitage, 2002). Included among these are black pansies (*Viola tricolor* L.), cannas (*Canna indica* L.), coleus (*Coleus sp.*), alun-root (*Heuchera L.*), pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum* Rich.), sweet potato vine (*Ipomoea batatas* Lam.), taro (*Colocasia esculenta*), and others. Many of these species have limited seasonal interest and lack wide adaptability. Ornamental peppers produce colorful fruit in addition to variable foliage color and provide an attractive display into the fall season. They are fibrous. Leaves and stems are glabrous and glossy. Leaves are simple, entire, lanceolate, apiculate at the tip, and symmetrical. At maturity, leaves average 8.2 cm in length (range: 7.4–11.0 cm) and 3.5 cm in width (range: 2.9–4.5 cm). Adaxial and abaxial foliar pigmentation is black (202A) [Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), 1966]. Plant habit is upright and growth is fastigate with branches ending in a fruit cluster. Plants average 45 cm in diameter (range: 44–47 cm) and 31 cm in height (range: 29–34 cm) (80 days post-transplanting). Flowers are self-compatible, hermaphroditic, pentamernous and hypogynous. Flowers average 2.2 cm in diameter (range: 2.0–2.4 cm) and have purple (77A) petals. Flower styles, filaments and anthers exhibit slightly darker purple (79A) pigmentation in comparison to petals. Fruit are produced in upright clusters of six to eight per cluster. Immature fruit are black (202A) and mature to red (46A). Fruit are round and average 1.6 cm in diameter (range: 1.3–1.7 cm).

‘Black Pearl’ produces a flush of full-size black fruit in about 60 days from transplanting and a flush of mature red fruit in approximately 80 days after transplanting under good growing conditions (see culture section). Additional fruit will continue to develop and ripen over a subsequent four- to six-week period. Fruit are extremely pungent. ‘Black Pearl’ is intended for ornamental applications and so Scoville pungency units were not determined. Although edible, ornamental peppers are typically very pungent and are grown for their unusual pod...
shapes or for their dense foliage and colorful fruit (Bosland and Votava, 1999).

Culture

‘Black Pearl’ has been trialed extensively for use as a bedding plant where its compact growth habit, black foliage, and brightly colored erect fruit provide an attractive ornamental display. Limited evaluations suggest that this cultivar is equally well suited for pot culture under high light conditions. Tests in controlled environments indicate that foliar pigmentation is reduced under short day, low light conditions (data not shown). ‘Black Pearl’ does not require pinching or application of growth regulators to maintain its growth habit. Similar to peppers grown for culinary use, ‘Black Pearl’ is a warm season crop requiring minimum daytime temperatures of 18 to 21 °C. The base growing-degree day temperature for pepper is 18 °C. Optimal growth is achieved
at higher temperatures up to 32 °C. Plants grow poorly in the 5 to 15 °C range and are frost susceptible (Bosland, 1999). Plants are best established from transplants produced in a warm greenhouse. Typical of most peppers, seedling emergence occurs in 10 to 12 d at 21 to 24 °C and is markedly delayed at reduced temperatures (Love, 1987). Plants suitable for transplanting (15 to 20 cm tall) are ready in 6 weeks from seeding. Plants prefer a well-drained loam or sandy loam soil with some organic matter and a pH range of 7.0 to 8.5. Satisfactory drainage reduces the incidence of infection by soilborne diseases such as phytophthora root rot.

**Availability**

Seed of ‘Black Pearl’ is available from Pan American Seed Co., 622 Town Road, West Chicago, IL 60185. Plant Variety Protection for ‘Black Pearl’ has been requested. A voucher seed sample of this release has been submitted to the USDA, AMS, Plant Variety Protection Office and will be deposited in the National Plant Germplasm System. It is requested that appropriate recognition be made if this germplasm contributes to the development of a new breeding line or cultivar.

**Literature Cited**