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Chile peppers add a dash of spice and color to the garden



Cultivated for 8,000 years, South American chile peppers conquered the globe before Spanish settlements even gained a foothold in the New World. Distributed locally by birds, regionally by trade, and globally by Christopher Columbus, chiles have become a worldwide staple, a burst of flavor and color in gardens and foods on every inhabited continent.

Mankind has bred more than 5,000 varieties of chile for use as spice, vegetable, medicine, and ornamental plants. And despite their reputation in North America as a desert crop, many varieties can be quite at home nearly anywhere on the continent.

"You cannot get in a grocery store or even a farmers market the diversity that's out there," says Paul Bosland, director of the Chile Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, N.M. "There is so much diversity that you as a gardener or grower will find the ones that you like."

Bosland and his team are working hard to increase that diversity. They've collected chiles from around the world, and are breeding new varieties to meet the growing taste for chile—from low-heat habaneros that deliver the tropical fruit flavors of the colorful pepper without the variety's usual blinding sting, to palm-sized New Mexico varieties that bring back the flavors of the traditional Southwest.

They've even identified the hottest pepper on earth, India's Bhut Jolokia chile, with a heat rating of 1 million Scoville heat units (SHUs). SHUs are the standard measure of chiles' pain potential: a jalapeno can rate 15,000 SHUs, habaneros may hit 300,000, and bear repellent packs 3.3 million.

A thousand flavors. Learning to really enjoy chile peppers is about far more than Scoville units, flaming tongues, and sweaty brows. It's a lot like learning to taste wine, Bosland explains.



Top: Capsaicinoids, chemicals that elicit the same nerve response as fire, collect in chile seeds and placenta.

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By Steve Werblow



After all, there are 22 different alkaloids in the capsaicin family that cause the famous heat sensation from chiles, he notes, and more than 1,000 chemical compounds that create the broad spectrum of flavor and aromas in chile peppers.

“When you first drink wine, you just notice it has alcohol—then you start discovering the flavors,” says Bosland. “With chiles, it’s similar. There’s a flavor component and a heat component. And within the heat profile, there are different characteristics. When you bite into a chile pepper, where in your mouth do you perceive the heat? Does it dissipate quickly, or does it linger? Is it sharp like a pinprick, or flat, like painting the heat in your mouth?”

Identifying those characteristics can help zero in on the right chile for a particular dish—for instance, choosing between the slow, lingering heat of a habanero or the quick stab on the lips from a jalapeno or a Japanese Takanotsume “hawk claw.”

Capsaicin content can vary dramatically not only by variety, but by where and how the pepper was grown, adds Danise Coon, manager of the Chile Pepper Institute’s demonstration farm.

“If a plant gets stressed at least a little bit, it will produce more capsaicin,” Coon notes.

Don’t over-water. Chile peppers thrive in a wide variety of environments as long as they aren’t over-watered, says Coon—soil should be barely moist at an inch deep. She starts her peppers indoors, transplanting them when they’re about 6 inches tall.

“We try to transplant on a day that isn’t going to be too hot, and irrigate right away,” she says. For more details on varieties, cultivation, and recipes, check out chilepepperinstitute.org or Bosland’s *The Complete Chile Pepper Book*. ■

See more images at JohnDeereHomestead.com.

- 1:** Chris Alexander creates traditional chile ristras at his shop in La Mesilla, N.M.
- 2:** NuMex Twilight peppers glow like Christmas lights.
- 3:** Danise Coon runs the Chile Pepper Institute’s demonstration garden.
- 4:** Golden fruit reflects summer light.
- 5:** NuMex Centennial chiles shine violet in the garden.

