

In the hot seat – helping run NMSU's Chile Pepper Institute

Got a question about paprika, but live in Paraguay? Want to know more about cayenne, but you're from Cameroon? What if you need some info about jalapeños in Houston? Just call New Mexico State University's Chile Pepper Institute, and be sure to ask for Danise.

"I never thought in a million years I would know as much about chile peppers as I do now," said Danise Coon, a senior research specialist for the institute. She regularly hears from TV networks like the Travel Channel, HGTV and Food Network when they're looking for information on chile. She also talks to people all over the world who call the institute seeking answers.

"How do I make the burning stop?' That's by far the number one question we get asked," she said. Other questions are more run-of-the-mill and focus on how to grow chile plants indoors and what kind of fertilizers to use.

As senior research coordinator, her duties include splitting time between guiding students who take part in research projects and coordinating programs like ASSURED, which shows the science side of agriculture to students who come from migrant farm-working families. She currently oversees two students who work at the institute's office and another seven who work in the greenhouse.

"Most of our research revolves around the chile industry in New Mexico. Mostly disease resistance, some cultivar development and research on salt tolerance," she said.

Coon has a bachelor's and a master's degree in horticulture from NMSU and started working at the institute as a student in 1995. She had worked for several years at a local flower shop as a floral designer but was having trouble balancing school and work. That's when she went to John Mexal, her professor at the time, and asked if he knew of any jobs on campus.

"He looked me straight in the eye and said, 'Go talk to Paul Bosland. He always seems to have money for students,'" Coon said.

Bosland is the director of the Chile Pepper Institute and widely recognized as the world's foremost authority on chile.

She was hired right away as a greenhouse aid and later moved to the institute's office. She was hired professionally in 2005.

"I owe a lot to Dr. Bosland," Coon said. "Being around him, I learn something new every day. And it's been like that for the last 15 years."

Danise Coon

