

# LAKESIDE GROWER SATISFIES A BURNING DESIRE

Chili seeds, plants shipped across U.S. to heat seekers

KAREN PEARLMAN • U-T

## LAKESIDE

When Jim Duffy gets fired up, he truly gets fired up.

During the week, Duffy wields a hot hand as a welder for Solar Turbines, as he has for more than 20 years.

But in the evenings and on weekends, the Lakeside resident really turns up the heat.

The 51-year-old Brooklyn-born Duffy has been growing some of the world's rarest and hottest chilies at his Lakeside home and in nearby East County fields since 2004.

Since 2009, he has sold what he estimates to be nearly 15,000 chili plants — including the mouth-burning Trinidad 7 Pot, his best-selling Trinidad Scorpion, Naga Morich and Chocolate Habanero — as well as dried peppers and seeds all across the United States.

"If all goes according to plan, in 2012, I will have over 1,000 plants for seed production and over 60,000 plants with three fields in Southern California and one field in southeast Missouri," Duffy said during an interview at his modest Lakeside home, where he grows a few dozen of the chilies.

He calls his business Refining Fire and has set up a website, superhotchilies.com, to promote his venture.

Growing the plants is not easy. During a recent frost, many of the plants started to show signs of faltering. But Duffy maintains that even if the leaves are brown and dying, the plant will

survive and regenerate.

Duffy will be starting the annual process of growing a new crop starting next month, likely in a nearby greenhouse. By April the plants will be in their next home, either in pots or in the field, until the colorful chilies can be harvested in the fall, a time Duffy looks forward to every year.

"Each chili variety possesses its own heat level, as well as a unique flavor, and the beautiful colors of the chili can rival an exotic flower," he said.

Duffy's foray into chili growing started in 2003 when two of his co-workers shared some of their food with him, including their homemade salsas and sauces.

A cooking aficionado, he started to make and share his own creations, and one of those same co-workers told Duffy that he would buy his salsa if he made extra. Thus began Duffy's adventure of finding chilies online, and his initial venture into growing his own. Soon, the hotter the better became his quest.

Duffy is proud of at least a half dozen YouTube videos showing serious heat-seeking chili aficionados taking a Duffy-grown whole pepper and downing it in one sitting. The pained looks on their faces and the running commentary provided as they munch on the chili, is enough to make even a casual viewer start sweating.

He also has turned what was once a hobby into a way to help the Youth Venture Teen Center's outreach program in the East County, donating food and funds. Youth Venture is a part of El Cajon's Foothills Christian Church, where Duffy has been a longtime member. Some of the congregants volunteer "babysitting my plants at their



Grower Jim Duffy and some of his chili plants at his Lakeside home. His fields in Southern California and Missouri produce some of the world's hottest chili varieties. JOHN R. MCCUTCHEEN • U-T

homes," he noted.

"My vision is to become a major funding source for the Youth Venture Teen Center program," said Duffy. Another goal is to be able to retire from his day job within the next few years to concentrate on growing and selling his chilies.

Trinidad Scorpion seeds are his top seller, followed by Trinidad Scorpion dried peppers, Bhut Jolokia seeds, then Trinidad 7 Pot seeds.

All are certifiably hot. Chili peppers' heat is measured by Scoville heat units or SHU, and Chocolate Habaneros can range to about 500,000 SHU. But Duffy

said Marlin Bensinger, a member of the American Chemical Society, the Chile Pepper Institute of New Mexico State University and the Institute of Food and Agricultural Science of University of Florida, tested his peppers last year and some of his Trinidad Scorpions went above the 1.8 million SHU mark.

He recently picked up a new heat-seeking client in Los Angeles-based Melissa's/World Variety Produce, and counts local restaurant Cafe Coyote in Old Town as one of his buyers.

"I think what makes it great is to source it locally, and to have such a great

source," said Lehn Goetz, the owner of Cafe Coyote, which uses Duffy's chilies in some of salsas, feeding on customers' desire to spice thing up. "More and more people are seeking hot food. Plus, chilies are supposed to be good for metabolism. (Duffy's) chilies are great quality and because of our weather in San Diego, we can get year-round chilies. He is very devoted to getting the best chilies, really unique chilies."

The interest is certainly there worldwide. Not only has he sold his products to clients throughout the United States, he has shipped seeds to those as

far away as Finland and Australia.

Duffy's biggest challenge lies close to home: Pests.

"But with preventive maintenance using organic controls like ladybugs and sticky traps, they can be kept under control," Duffy said. "Since we have a long growing season in SoCal and mild weather, it is not a great challenge as far as weather issues. The only other challenge is getting the seeds to start. But now with a few years' experience, I have a handle on it."

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