

Little Red Ristra: Versatile chiles decorate as well as satiate

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LAS CRUCES — Mesilla Valley homeowners are already displaying the first signs of autumn in New Mexico. New, bright red ristras on our doors signal a new season, long before leaves turn color and fall.

Late summer red roses and fresh red ristras attract the attention of those strolling past the Mesilla home of Rep. Joni Gutierrez, D-NM, and her husband, New Mexico State University agricultural economics professor Lowell Catlett. They're among the first in their neighborhood to hang new ristras.

"I got these from Chris Alexander at Ristramann in Mesilla," said Gutierrez, a landscape architect who appreciates the visual impact of ristras and looks forward to the new harvest each year.

"I hate old ristras. When I have time, I do a garland, too. I hang one long chile garland above the door and then ristras on each side," she said.

Ristras add a potent form of curb appeal, said Elaine Szalay, a lifelong New Mexican and a Realtor.

"I love the contrast and the color with adobes and it smells so good when you walk in the front door," she said, adding that ristras might even help you attract buyers if your home is on the market.

"I think anytime you can dress up a home with something that's natural and native to the area, it makes a difference," she said.

This is prime time to pick up fresh ristras, which are available at area farmer's markets, roadside stands and festivals, including this weekend's Hatch Chile Festival.

Selection is fairly easy: look for healthy, unblemished chiles securely tied and ready to hang in your kitchen or by your front door as a traditional sign of harvest season hospitality in the Land of Enchantment.



If you plan to eat the chiles, check with the seller about organic or pesticide-free growing methods and make sure the ristra has not been treated with paint, varnish or other toxic preservation methods.

In addition to garlands and swags, you can vary your ristra decor with other hot chile shapes, including wreaths and crosses. Often smaller— and usually hotter — peppers are used for more intricate shapes.

Be warned that fresh mixed, red, yellow and green ristras don't hold true colors as well as traditional red ristras. Green chiles generally turn a less vibrant shade of pale or mottled red as they dry. If they're strictly for decoration and not to be eaten, you can always touch them up with paint later on. You can also spice up other wreaths in your home (including evergreen wreaths at Christmas) by adding a few dried red chile pods.

Once you get your fresh ristras home, hang in a dry, well-ventilated place.

Those of us who have tried share the chile wealth with others in pepper-deprived parts of the world have learned it's best not to ship fresh ristras off to humid climates. Make sure the chile pods are thoroughly dry before you ship, unless your recipient is likely to consume the chiles before rot or mildew sets in or understands how to care for ristras.

For many, the annual changing of the ristra is something of a tradition. Some dust and wash the old ristra, let it dry in the sun, and then pop off remaining chiles, whirl them in a blender, store in airtight jars or plastic bags and save to spice stews and other dishes. Or for a red chile sauce, whirl in blender, boil with water and your favorite ingredients and then strain and freeze.

You might even want to try your hand at making your own ristra, though it can be hot, hazardous and labor intensive work for an unskilled novice and you'll need a surprising amount of peppers to come up with a respectable swag. Since small ristras can start at \$10, you may decide it's not worth the effort and potential pain. If you're a chile novice, you might not be aware that some safety precautions are in order. Wear rubber gloves and avoid touching your eyes, nose or other sensitive parts of your body. When you're done, remove gloves and wash hands and exposed skin areas with soap and water.