

# NMSU's Chile Pepper Institute looks to spice up Christmas, other holidays year-round

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The traditional Christmas plant is the poinsettia, right? Not so fast. The correct answer is the chile plant - at least that's according to Paul Bosland, head of New Mexico State University's Chile Pepper Institute and the man widely considered to be the world's foremost chile pepper expert.

"Many years ago, if you gave someone a plant at Christmas, it would have been a chile plant," Bosland said. "Today, almost everyone thinks of poinsettias around Christmas. They have always been red and green, but it wasn't until the 1950s that growers bred poinsettias to fit in pots to be sold in stores."

Now, 60 years later, poinsettias rule when it comes to holiday plants. So, what's a chile plant to do after being jilted at Christmastime? What happens after being left behind for a newer, fancier piece of vegetation? Well, chile plants are free to go after the other holidays, of course. And, then maybe circle back around for Christmas, too.



New Mexico State University's Chile Pepper Institute has developed a line of nearly a dozen holiday ornamental chile plants, including plants with color combinations for Christmas, Valentine's Day and even Chinese New Year. (NMSU photo by Jay A. Rodman)

Bosland began developing holiday ornamental chile plants in the 1990s, specifically for the potted plant and nursery industries. The ornamentals were selected for dwarfing characteristics, giving the plants a compact stature. They were also selected for having colorful, upright fruit that spread across the top of the plant. Today, there are nearly a dozen varieties, each named for the holiday that corresponds with the color of the plant's chiles.

"We decided to let poinsettias have Christmas. We were going to take the rest of the holidays," Bosland said. "Then we decided we'd try to take back Christmas, too."

Valentine's Day plants have peppers that turn from white to red. St. Patrick's Day chiles go from green to orange. Halloween chiles go from black to orange. As most people would guess, Christmas chiles go from green to red. Other color combinations can be found for April Fool's Day, Memorial Day, Earth Day, Cinco de Mayo, Easter, Thanksgiving, Veteran's Day and even Chinese New Year. It takes about 10 years from making the first hybridization until a plant is released as a seed.

"Students really enjoy playing with the plants to develop new colors and color combinations," Bosland said. "Some of those students have gone on to become agricultural Extension agents and to work in large greenhouse operations in different parts of the country."

The Chile Pepper Institute's first two ornamental chile plants were the NuMex Twilight and NuMex Centennial, released in the late 1980s to correspond with the university's 100th anniversary. NuMex Twilight has white flowers and purple leaves while NuMex Centennial has

purple flowers and purple foliage. Both are smaller than traditional chile plants, but larger than the holiday ornamentals.

NuMex Twilight, NuMex Centennial and any of the holiday varieties can be grown in containers indoors, or in an outside garden. All chile plants are frost-tender and if kept outside, won't survive the winter. If kept indoors, with adequate light and water, chile plants can last ten years or more. Their peppers are also edible, but pack a punch when it comes to heat. Just like traditional holiday poinsettias, ornamental chiles can be placed around the house or serve as centerpieces for dinners.

"Chile is New Mexico's national identity," Bosland said. "These are real, live things you can use as decoration. Plus, it's nice to have these chiles. They're just fun."

The Chile Pepper Institute will have various holiday ornamentals for sale between now and Christmas.