

NMSU's NuMex Easter ornamental chile named All-America Selections winner

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Just in time for Peter Cottontail, NuMex Easter, an ornamental chile pepper plant bred by New Mexico State University's Chile Pepper Institute, has been named an All-America Selections winner. The recognition highlights the plant's ability to flourish in different climates across the country. This is the first time any plant bred by NMSU has been named an All-America Selections winner.

"We started breeding ornamentals as something fun for our students, but also as something for the potted plant and nursery industries," said Paul Bosland, an NMSU Regents professor and director of the Chile Pepper Institute. "It's exciting to be able to commercialize something developed at NMSU. It's another way to foster economic development."



NuMex Easter, an ornamental chile pepper plant bred by NMSU's Chile Pepper Institute, has been named an All-America Selections winner. (NMSU photo by Rosemary Woller)

All-America Selections is a nonprofit organization that tests new varieties of flowers and bedding plants, and then introduces the best performers as their "AAS Winners." The organization has nearly 200 gardens in geographically diverse areas across the country where judges score the performance of the plants. NMSU's Fabian Garcia Science Center in Las Cruces became an AAS evaluation site in 2013. According to the organization's website, "AAS Winners offer gardeners reliable new varieties that have proven their superior garden performance."

"This means that whether someone is in New Mexico, California or Maine, NuMex Easter should do well," Bosland said. "This plant is heat-tolerant, drought resistant and makes for a nice container plant."

Like other ornamental chile varieties, NuMex Easter was selected for dwarfing characteristics, giving it a compact stature ideal for garden beds or indoor pots. The plant was also selected for having colorful, upright fruit, which spread across the top of the plant. The peppers for NuMex Easter are pastel purple, yellow and orange.

"Our students enjoy working with the ornamentals and developing new colors and color combinations. They also learn a lot about genetics because the plants have so many obvious traits to work with," Bosland said.

NMSU began developing holiday ornamental chile plants in the 1990s and today have more than a dozen different varieties. Their 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. Other color combinations can be found for April Fool's Day, Memorial Day, Earth Day, Cinco de Mayo, Thanksgiving, Veterans Day and even Chinese New Year. It takes about 10 years from making the first hybridization until a plant is ready to be released to the public.

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 New Mexico State University's 100th anniversary.

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 10 years or more. Their peppers also are edible, but pack a punch when it comes to heat.

Some of the score sheet comments for NuMex Easter included the phrases: "exceptional plant, love this little pepper, striking color, eye-catching, so easy to grow, loaded with pepper fruits in fun colors and a favorite of garden visitors."

For more information about NuMex Easter or other ornamental chiles, contact the Chile Pepper Institute at 575-646-3028. NuMex Easter seeds and plants are available at the Institute.