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Sun-News photo by Vladimir Chaloupka
Penguins at the North Pole, a skating rink and bright holiday lights are some of the attractions that can be seen outside Joe Novak's home on Egyptian Street.

Peppers take on poinsettias NMSU

Tired of seeing the poinsettia hog all the yuletide cheer, a New Mexico State University chile breeder is developing colorful lines of ornamental chile peppers sure to warm the coldest Grinch's heart.

"Poinsettias seem to be the most popular plant to give because of marketing," humbugged Paul Bosland, a professor with NMSU's Agricultural Experiment Station and director of NMSU's Chile Pepper Institute. "But ornamental chiles are available now – chiles that have long fruit, short fruit, purple fruit, red, green, yellow, orange, all the different colors."

Bosland has produced several varieties of miniature chile pepper plants that can be raised in 4-inch pots and grow from four to six inches high indoors. Pods in several of the varieties are about the size of fat jellybeans.

The potted plants flower continuously, so there are peppers of different colors at different times of the year, he said. All chiles are perennials, but outdoor plants are susceptible to frost damage, Bosland said. As houseplants, though, they're troupers.

"We have members of the Chile Pepper Institute who have plants that are 10 years old," he said.

Ornamental chiles are edible, but they lack the subtle flavor differences of jalapeño or New Mexican types. With ornamental chile, buyers are after color and shape, he said.

Before ornamental chiles can give poinsettias a run for their money, more research is needed in ornamental chile market development and shipping stability.

"We need to be able to ship them to Boston where they can stay in a floral shop for three weeks and still have someone take home a nice product," he said. "That's what we're really looking for."

While yuletide chiles are new, chile peppers in general are not. Spanish settlers brought their chile into what is now New Mexico in the 1600s. Over the centuries, the plant breeders and growers have transformed the plants from an unpredictable mix of shapes, sizes and heat levels to today's uniform pods.

In 1888, horticulturist Fabian Garcia, working at what was then known as the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, began a series of groundbreaking experiments to develop more standardized chile varieties. Early in the 1900s, he released "New Mexico 9," the first variety with a dependable pod size and heat level.

New Mexico's chile industry now boasts varieties aplenty – greens, reds, jalapeños, cayennes and paprikas. As a niche cash crop, New Mexico's chile is worth about \$60 million at harvest. After processing, its value quadruples, making it the state's most valuable vegetable. The vast majority, about 95 percent of the crop, is harvested from seven southern and eastern New Mexico counties.

Using miniature chile pepper plants to celebrate Christmas isn't much of a stretch for most New Mexicans. They've already turned chile into the de facto state symbol, plastering pods on posters, coffee mugs and T-shirts. Chile even shares official state vegetable status with the pinto bean. (For the record, the pinto bean is a legume and chile is technically a fruit.)

If things go well for the Christmas peppers, other holidays can be spiced up. Bosland is already working on a Halloween version with purple foliage and small black and orange chiles, as well as a Valentine variety with peppers that turn from white to red.

"At least we won't be competing head-to-head with poinsettias," he said with a laugh.