



Diann's Herb Newsletter

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The International Herb Association selects the Herb of the Year (HOY). Here is a list of the ones starting from the beginning of the 21st century:

2016

Capsicum

- 2015 Savory
- 2014 Artemisia
- 2013 Elder
- 2012 Rose
- 2011 Horseradish
- 2010 Dill
- 2009 Bay Laurel
- 2008 Calendula
- 2007 Lemon Balm
- 2006 Pelargonium
- 2005 Oregano
- 2004 Garlic
- 2003 Basil
- 2002 Echinacea
- 2001 Sage
- 2000 Rosemary

Ristras are chiles tied by their stems with twine and hung in the hot sun to dry.

Spice Up Your Life with Capsicum

Although we call them peppers, chiles aren't peppers at all. Oops! We've caught Columbus in another mistake. When he and his crew discovered the pungent flavor of chiles in food in the New World, they thought it was another form of black pepper, so they called it "red pepper," and from there chile peppers have spread around the world.

Actually, chiles belong to the genus *Capsicum* and the Solanaceae or nightshade family, which includes the tomato, potato, eggplant, and petunia. The chile is a vitamin powerhouse, containing more vitamin C than an orange. They also contain large amounts of potassium, beta carotene, and fiber. Research is continuing to determine how chiles may help in medicine to relieve pain, prevent cardiovascular disorders, certain forms of cancer, and cataracts. If you've ever eaten a "hot" chile, you know its power—salivation and sweating increase, the nose begins to run, the heart starts to beat rapidly, and the gastrointestinal tract goes into overdrive. The brain, in order to stop the pain, is triggered to secrete endorphins, the opiate-like substances that block pain.

So why do we keep flavoring our food with chiles? That's a good question. Maybe we really like pain, or could it be those endorphins? Whatever it is, chiles are now essential to the cuisines of Asia, Africa, the Americas, and even parts of Europe. It was in the Balkans that chiles were bred to reduce the pungency and for a shorter growing season, giving us paprika. Now we have many varieties of sweet chiles.

What makes chiles hot? It's not the seeds. I learned this fact last year. Scientists discovered that the white membranes (the placenta) inside the chile contain small sacs that break easily when the fruit is cut. These sacs contain capsaicin, a chemical so potent



Photo by Paul Bosland

Peter Piper Picked a Peck of Pickled Peppers

Peter Piper picked a
peck of pickled
peppers;
A peck of pickled
peppers Peter Piper
picked;
If Peter Piper picked
a peck of pickled
peppers,
Where's the peck of
pickled peppers Peter
Piper picked?

By Mother Goose

that the average person can detect its pungency at a dilution of 10 parts per million. You can actually see the sacs as orange color on the white membranes. So the more orange you see, the hotter the chile.

In 1912 Wilbur L. Scoville invented a system for measuring the pungency of chiles. It's called Scoville Heat Units (SHU). If you want to know how it works, go to the Internet; human tasters are involved. The short story is that the higher the number, the hotter the chile. For instance, a jalapeno may have 5,000 SHU while a Serrano may have 10,000 SHU, and habaneros can score up to 500,000 SHU. There are many factors that may contribute to the "hotness" of an individual chile: its genetic makeup, the weather, growing conditions, and fruit age. For instance a green jalapeno would have lower SHU than a red jalapeno. Did you know that the red jalapeno is the recently popularized Sriacha chile? It isn't quite as exotic as you may think. Jack (in the Box) didn't have to go to the hinterlands to discover it.

What do you do if you eat a chile that's hotter than you expected? "Chile-heads" do not agree on the best remedy. Some claim that plain water is best, while some advocate for sugar, beer, bread, citrus fruits, tomato juice, and/or oil. The latest scientific research says that consuming milk and milk-based products is best; they contain casein, a protein that unbinds the capsaicin from nerve receptors on the taste buds. Beans, nuts, and milk chocolate also contain casein, so they may also cool down your taste buds. An important reminder is always to wear gloves when handling hot chiles, and don't touch your face. I speak from experience.

If you grow chiles, you know that they can be very abundant mid-to late-summer. There are many ways to preserve them. They can be kept up to a year in vinegar; in oil is also a good way to keep chiles. Drying red chiles works well. Green chiles dry so slowly that it's best to roast and freeze them. Chiles can be prepared as a sweet or pungent jelly to serve year-round.

You may want to save seeds, but chiles can cross pollinate, so you may not produce the same chile you had the year before.

Some information from Brooklyn Botanic Garden, *Chile Peppers*, 1999.

Herbal Workshops

Would you like to have a workshop with your friends? This year, instead of pre-scheduling specific workshops, I want to let you decide what you'd like to know about herbs—from choosing, growing, using, and preserving to anything you choose. Get together with 5 to 10 of your friends, pick a topic, then schedule date and time with me, and I'll do the rest.

You may want to look back at the schedules of workshops on www.diannsgreenhouse.com for ideas, but don't feel limited to those topics. The cost will vary, for instance, you want to bring your own container for planting an herb garden, or you may want to have a demonstration rather than a hands-on experience.

Recipes

Chile or Chili

What's the difference between chili and chile? Chile refers to the fruit of the chile plant—what you might call a pepper. Chili refers to any condiment or dish made with chiles. For example, you use chili powder to make chili. Chili powder contains ground up chiles as well as other ingredients. Commercial chili powders vary from company to company. You may wish to try making your own.

Chili Powder (Makes about 2 cups.)

6 large New Mexico hot dried chiles
6 dried chipotle chiles
3 large pasilla negro chiles
2 large mulato chiles
6 tablespoons cumin seed
6 tablespoons coriander seed
1 tablespoon whole cloves
1 tablespoons celery seeds
6 tablespoons paprika
2 tablespoons ground cayenne

Oregano to taste (May be added to your chili individually.)

1. Break the dried chiles. Remove the stems and shake out most of the seeds. Toast the chiles in two or three batches on an ungreased skillet or griddle over medium heat for about 30 seconds. The chiles should just begin to release their aroma. Do not let them darken or they will become bitter tasting. Let the chiles cool to room temperature on a plate.
2. Toast the cumin, coriander, and cloves on a large ungreased skillet or griddle over low heat until they release their fragrance and become lightly toasted, about 3 minutes. Let the spices cool to room temperature on a plate.
3. Break the chiles up further by hand or in a food processor. Grind them in small batches in a spice grinder or clean coffee mill.
4. Grind the toasted spices and celery seed in small batches in a spice grinder or coffee mill.
5. Mix the ground chiles and ground spices together. For a fine powder, which is best, grind the mixture in small batches.
6. Stir in the paprika and cayenne. Store the chili powder in tightly-sealed glass jars away from the heat and light.

Red Pepper Jelly

2½ pounds red peppers of your choice (This can be a mixture of chiles.)
1½ cups water
1½ cups apple cider or vinegar
1 1¾-ounce package powdered pectin
5½ cups sugar

1. Stem and seed peppers and puree them as finely as possible in a food processor, about 1 minute; there should be about 5 cups of puree.
2. Transfer the pepper puree and the water to a heavy-bottomed stainless or enameled pot. Place over moderately high heat. When the liquid comes to a simmer, lower the heat to medium and simmer slowly for about 12 minutes, stirring occasionally.
3. Transfer the cooked pepper puree to a jelly bag or strainer lined with dampened cheesecloth and let the juice drip for 45 minutes to 1 hour, or until cool. Stir the puree occasionally with a spoon but do not squeeze the bag.
4. Pour the strained juice into a large heavy-bottomed pot; there should be about 2½ cups of liquid. Add water to equal 2½ cups, only if needed; then add the vinegar and pectin, stirring well.
5. Bring the contents of the pot to a full boil, add the sugar all at once, and bring to a boil that can't be stirred down; boil and stir for 1 minute. Pour into sterilized jars and seal.

Pepper Spray

Capsaicin extracted from chiles is used in pepper spray as an irritant, a form of less-lethal weapon.

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