

Peppers!

Hot and Sweet Varieties

NJ Conservation Partnership

Fact sheet #1

Where does one start writing a Fact sheet designed to provide information on peppers or the fruit from the genus *Capsicum*? How about a little history? Christopher Columbus is credited with first naming fruit from the genus *Capsicum*, "peppers". He first encountered them in the Caribbean and he confused the flavor with the fruit of the more familiar *Piper* or peppercorn plant. There are hundreds of varieties of cultivated peppers from the familiar Bell pepper to the less well known but volcanically hot Habanero pepper. The spiciness of peppers is rated on a scale known as Scoville Heat Units, (SHU) where one SHU is equal to the degree of dilution required to totally remove the heat from your tongue. Peppers come in every size, shape and heat carrying capacity imaginable, so where to start? From the old, familiar beginning of course:

Bell Pepper: Surely the most popular world-wide and mildest member of the *Capsicum* family. It is also known as the sweet pepper. Bell pepper shapes can vary but the most familiar are large and round, and they start out green ripening to red. Most people don't know that the red bell pepper in the produce aisle, that costs three times as much as the green ones, are actually the same pepper only it was picked when it was ripe. Heat level is 0 (0 SHU).



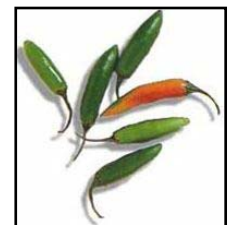
Jalapeno Pepper: The Jalapeno originated in Mexico - it is named after the Veracruz city of Xalapa (Jalapa) - and is America's most popular chili pepper. It is about 3 inches long and 1 inch wide at the top end, tapering to a point. Jalapenos start out green but vary in ripened color from bright red to deep purple. Jalapenos that are dried over a wood fire are called "Chipotles" and these smoky tasting beauties have a very unique flavor. As with many hot peppers the red ripened peppers are hotter than the immature green fruits, with the seeds being the hottest part of the fruit. Jalapenos are in the middle of the spice scale with a heat level of 5 (2000-5000 SHU).



Cayenne Pepper: Undoubtedly the most widely used chili in Indian and Indo-Chinese cookery, the Cayenne derived its name from the Tupi Indians of the Cayenne district of French Guiana, from whence the Portuguese transported it to Asia around 1500AD. The Cayenne chili is long, thin and twisty with a sharp point. Cayenne peppers produce an immense amount of fruit per plant and grow well in NJ. They dry easily and one can provide a nice "kick" to a pot of spaghetti sauce if added during the simmer stage. Heat level is 7 (30,000-50,000 SHU).



Serrano Pepper: The Serrano, meaning 'from the mountains', is native to Mexico and south-west America. These are small "bullet" shaped peppers that grow abundantly on large bluish-green airy looking plants. They are green, ripening to a deep rich, red color so deep they appear to be artificial. Serranos are easy to grow, ripen later than some peppers and a few plants can supply the neighborhood with enough spicy little peppers to satisfy everyone. Not as popular as the well known Jalapeno but a clear winner in terms of heat and flavor. Heat level is 6-7 (10,000-15,000 SHU).



Tabasco Pepper: The Tabasco chili originated from a state of the same name in south-east Mexico. In Tabasco the land is mostly flat and marshy, and the climate is hot and humid with extensive jungles. This pepper can be found growing commercially in Louisiana, the home of the famous sauce company, where it has grown since at least 1850. The Tabasco pepper is easily identified on the plant as it is small (1 inch long), grows pointing upwards, and is bright red when picked. Tabasco peppers pack a potent punch with a heat level of 9 (30,000 to 50,000 SHU).



Habanero Pepper: This chili pepper is of South American origin and starts out light green, ripening from bright orange to a deep, magma-like red. The Habanero is one of the world's hottest chili peppers and not intended for the faint of heart. The Scotch Bonnet, as it is referred to in Jamaica, is the primary component and source of heat for their famous "jerk" sauce. Be forewarned that even a tiny piece of Habanero can cause intense and prolonged oral suffering. Have you ever tried a pepper "too hot to handle"? Use dairy to put out the fire. It's not by accident that hot peppers are served many times with ranch-like dressings. Habanero peppers are 2 inches long by 3 inches wide and have an irregular, wrinkled, spheroid shape, with a small point. Habanero plants are different from your typical pepper in that they have thick, waxy, heart-shaped leaves and the peppers take forever to ripen! Seed catalogues list it from 75 to 125 days to harvest. Heat level is a 10, with off-the-charts SHU of 300,000! This IS magma in a fruit!



Poblano Pepper: The story on Poblano peppers can get confusing, so pay attention. The best quality Poblano chili is quite big, over 5 inches in length and 3 inches wide, with a conical shape and one well defined crevice running along the entire length. It's got thick walls, sometimes undulating, which give it varied forms in its ripened state. The most popular Poblano pepper grown today is the green Poblano. When dried, the green Poblano chili pepper is better known as Ancho. Got that? An "Ancho chili" is actually a dried, green Poblano. Heat index is 3 (1,000 to 1,500 SHU).



Pepper growing tips:

Growing peppers in NJ is easy and rewarding, and with a few tips you can be the most productive pepper grower in your neighborhood. Try these easy tips to increase your pepper production.

1. Plant your peppers in the poorest soil in your garden. Peppers thrive in poorer soils.
2. DO NOT fertilize your pepper plants. Peppers hate commercial fertilizer, especially those with Nitrogen. Instead, wait until the plants flower and then thoroughly spray the leaves of your pepper plants with the following mixture of 1 teaspoon of Epsom salts, to 1 qt. of water. Wait 1 week and spray again. Pepper plants need few nutrients but require Magnesium to set fruit. Epsom salts will provide that limiting nutrient. You will be amazed at the results with dozens of peppers being produced per plant.
3. Peppers do enjoy small amounts of Potassium, so spread some wood ashes on your pepper ground over the winter to prepare it for spring planting.

For further information about peppers and pepper varieties:

<http://www.g6csy.net/chile/database.html>

<http://www.chemsoc.org/exemplarchem/entries/mbellringer/>

<http://www.chilepepperinstitute.org/>

* This Fact sheet was partially developed from information obtained from the above websites.