

ALABAMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM/ LIMESTONE COUNTY OFFICE

The Garden Spot
For week of August 10, 2009

Peppers, Peppers, Peppers

This summer, peppers seem to be plentiful. Whether it's sweet bell peppers, or the hottest of the hottest, peppers are pretty and can be used in many ways.

Peppers were domesticated in Mexico. As early as 6,000 years ago, red peppers were used in tropical South America as a spice to disguise the taste of bland or unpalatable food. Chili peppers are called **chile** in Mexico and Central America and **aji** in South America and the West Indies. Columbus took peppers back to Europe where they rapidly became popular.

Pepper cultivars, which number in the hundreds, are usually classified as sweet or hot. Peppers also vary by fruit shape, flavor, pungency, color, and culinary use. Pickling, grinding, roasting, drying, and freezing can influence flavor.

All bell peppers belong to the species *Capsicum annuum*. Hot peppers may belong to several other species. The *C. chinense* cultivars Habanero and Scotch Bonnet are among the hottest.

How hot is hot?

The pungency or heat of a pepper depends on seven closely related alkaloids or capsaicinoids. In the early 1900s, Wilbur L. Scoville devised a test to determine the relative hotness of different peppers. Capsaicin from a known weight of pepper was extracted with alcohol and mixed in various concentrations with sweetened water. Human tasters were asked to identify the point at which water neutralized the hotness. The volume of water required for each sample was assigned a rating in Scoville units—the larger the number, the more water needed and the hotter the pepper. Modern tests have replaced this process, but the

measurements are still expressed in Scoville units. For comparison's sake: a bell pepper has 0 Scoville units; a Jalapeno has roughly 2,000 – 4,000 Scoville unites, and a Habanero has between 100,000 and 400,000 Scoville units.

Harvest and storage

Hot peppers and bell peppers can be harvested in the immature green stage or when fully ripe. They can be eaten fresh, used in sauces, pickled, frozen, or dried. Bell peppers are usually harvested when large and firm in the immature green stage. They also may be allowed to fully ripen to red, yellow, orange, purple, or other colors. Fully ripe bell peppers are slightly sweeter and have a higher vitamin content than do the immature green peppers.

Fresh peppers may be stored for up to 3 weeks in cool, moist conditions (45 to 50°F and 85 to 90 percent relative humidity).

Bell peppers and hot peppers can be frozen or dried for later use. Hot peppers also can be pickled.

Pickled Hot Peppers

- 4 pounds long hot peppers*
- 1/1/2 pounds sweet red peppers
- 1 ½ pounds green bell peppers
- 5 cups white vinegar (5% acidity)
- 1 cup water
- 4 teaspoons pickling salt
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 garlic cloves

Wash hot peppers. Small ones may be left whole; large ones may be quartered. Cut two to four slits in each pepper to allow steam to escape. To removed the tough skin on hot peppers, blister them by placing hot peppers on a baking sheet or flat pan in a hot oven (400°) or under a broiler for 6 to 8 minutes until skins blister.

Allow hot peppers to cool; then, place them in a pan and cover with a damp cloth. This will make peeling the peppers easier. After several minutes, peel each pepper. Discard seeds; flatten whole peppers. Wash sweet red and green bell peppers. Cut them in half and remove seeds and cores. Boil enough water to cover sweet peppers. Add peppers and blanch 3 minutes. Drain. Combine vinegar, water, salt, sugar, and garlic in a large saucepan. Heat to boiling, reduce heat, and simmer 10 minutes to make a pickling liquid. Fill hot jars with evenly mixed peppers, leaving a ½-inch headspace. Remove garlic from liquid. Add boiling liquid to cover peppers, leaving a ½ inch headspace. Remove air bubbles. Wipe jar rims and adjust lids. Process in a boiling water-bath canner: Half-pints and pints: 10 minutes.

***Note:** includes banana, chili, Hungarian, and jalapeno peppers.

Caution: Wear rubber gloves while handling hot peppers and wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before touching your face.

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