



HOT HOT HEAT

Hooked on peppers from around the world BY VANESSA SALVIA

“Welcome to chaos,” says Jeffrey Eaton when I meet him for the first time at his house. Eaton is proprietor of “Garden of Eaton,” his home-based business producing tomato and pepper starts, and he’s helping customers left and right while navigating the cramped garage and yard filled with pots of growing things.

A lady is walking to her car with more plants than she can carry, along with a list of the 200 varieties of tomatoes Eaton grows so she can come back and get more. In the front yard of his River Road-area home are two hoop-houses of cherry tomatoes and paste tomatoes, and various hot peppers from Mexico, the American Southwest and the Caribbean. Eaton has pots of sweet varieties of bell peppers and pimiento peppers; ethnic sweet peppers from Eastern Europe, Spain and Italy; various paprika peppers; Thai, Chinese, South East Asian cayennes, spicy Indian and South American peppers — some common but most exotic — and some ornamental varieties. “And in back there’s more,” Eaton says with a laugh.

It’s the end of May, and Eaton is already sold out of some varieties he grows, including the Northeast Indian *bhut jolokia*, commonly known as the Ghost Pepper. The world’s hottest pepper at more than a million Scoville heat units, the *bhut jolokia* is so powerful that the Indian military announced last year that it planned to “weaponize” the peppers for tear-gas grenades.

Even without the Ghost Peppers, Eaton’s selection is astonishing. Of the 200 peppers he grows, more than 140

of them are hot, such as the Bolivian Rainbow, a “searingly hot” pepper grown in Bolivia for centuries. Or the “extremely hot” Chiltepin (*Capsicum annuum*), thought to be the progenitor for all *Capsicum annuum* chile varieties, which grows wild in the American Southwest, Mexico and Central America. He’s got Dundicut, a hot pepper native to Pakistan, with a “fruity, complex and full-bodied flavor.” And Fatalii (*Capsicum chinense*), a “seriously hot” relative to the habanero from Central African Republic, which is particularly fragrant and flavorful. For less piquance, try the seasoning peppers, such as Aji Dulce Yellow (*Capsicum chinense*), which resembles a habanero pepper but lacks any heat.

Eaton himself can’t pick a favorite. “I love sweet peppers. I love pimiento varieties,” he says. “They’re very sweet, crunchy and delicious in various colors and shapes. But the pepper I use the most is the Serrano, which is particularly good for salsas.”

The peripatetic pepper trail is a study of the world’s cultures and their movements. The archeological record shows that *Capsicum annuum* was cultivated in Mexico as early as 7000 BC. Christopher Columbus found pungent pods in the Caribbean and took them to the Old World, where they fell into the hands of spice merchants, and within 50 years of landing in Spain they had traveled the world.

Five *Capsicum* species are primarily responsible for this passion play. Throughout much of the world peppery food is consumed every day, at each meal. Part of the pleasure of growing exotic peppers is that you can delve

into a variety of ethnic cuisines and use the actual peppers that a recipe calls for. For Eaton, that was Mexican mole (mol-ay) sauce. “I liked Mexican food and got interested in mole sauce and read that there was a ‘trinity’ of chilies in mole sauce,” he says, referring to ancho, mulato and pasillo peppers. “As I was finding seeds for those I discovered this incredible diversity.”

The 59-year-old Eaton began gardening as a kid, and has been growing peppers for almost 15 years now. He began with a thousand tomato and pepper starts, which he grew as a donation to the Mount Pisgah Arboretum annual fundraising plant sale several years ago. He now grows 9,000 plants in five greenhouses in his front and back yards.

Still, Eaton admits the Northwest is a challenging environment. “It’s not ideal for hot peppers,” he says. “On the other hand, it’s not true that you have to have a hot climate to get heat out of hot peppers. As long as you have a sufficient number of growing days and enough warm days for the plants to develop, you can get peppers.” The problem is that these are essentially tropical plants, and many of them need well over one hundred days to develop, while in Eugene the growing season runs a maximum of one hundred days.

“I suck at growing them,” says Eugene resident Joe Norris, one of Eaton’s regular customers. “I eat the heck out of them though.” Norris eats so many peppers throughout the year that he invented the PepperShark, a tool to tame heat by easily removing the seeds. Norris attempts to grow 40 to 50 varieties of hot peppers in his home garden. He says it’s a “crap shoot” whether they bear fruit before freezing. “If you start them early you will get some peppers,” Norris says.

Eaton uses space heaters in his hoop-houses when temperatures at night dip below 40 degrees. He says to be sure and mix in a balanced organic granular fertilizer when you plant peppers, and add some calcium such as oyster shell. “A lot of people go out and water their garden every day with a hose,” Eaton says, “but tomatoes and peppers really like to be watered less frequently and deeply, so get out there perhaps once a week to water.”

Really long-season peppers can be brought inside in a deep pot. “Most peppers are perennials and they can survive over winter,” Eaton says, “and often times the second year they are more prolific than the first.”

And when the weather cooperates, what can you do with all those peppers? Norris eats them fresh and preserves them every way he can, looking to the world’s cuisines for guidance. Many of them end up pickled, frozen or dried. Eaton also primarily uses the fresh peppers, though he recently bought a food dehydrator and spice grinder, with plans to make his own paprika.

Many of Garden of Eaton’s customers buy a plant or two, but some buy as many as fifty. It’s the people who get really excited that make the effort worthwhile for him. “A lot of people see my sign and they want an ‘Early Girl’ [tomato] and a green bell pepper, and that’s fine,” Eaton says. “But there are others who show up and it’s like they’re in a candy store. And those are the people I think I do it for.” ■

Find Garden of Eaton at the Hideaway Bakery Farmers Market behind Mazzi’s on East Amazon, Saturdays 9 am-2 pm, or at 2650 Summer Lane; 228-6470.



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