

DANGER! HIGH SPICE-AGE!

Inside the deceptively dangerous chili pepper BY SHANNON FINNELL

No food is quite as synonymous with “hot” as chili peppers. Whether adding a slight kick to a bland dish or providing the core of the spicy food lover’s diet, chili peppers can bring a range of flavors to a dish — and the spiciness factor is actually a matter of anatomy.

Capsaicin, the chemical that makes chili peppers hot, is distributed unevenly throughout the fruit. Nellie Oehler, who oversees master food preparers for OSU’s Lane County Extension, says that most people ditch the most spicy, capsaicin-ated parts of the pepper.

“People usually cut them open and take out the seeds and the veins, but I know people that like the seeds because there’s more heat in the seeds,” Oehler says. “It depends on what you like.”

Even those who like it hot need to be careful with the genus *Capsicum*, though, because capsaicin is present at some level throughout the fruit, even on the outside of the skin. Oehler recommends using a plastic produce bag to pick them up at the grocery store, because the capsaicin residue can rub off on skin. “You pick them up out of the bins at the store, and then you wipe your kid’s eye — that can be really dangerous,” she says.

Oehler sees a lot of people overestimating their capacity to cope with chili pepper fumes and suffering the consequences. “People are macho: ‘I can do this, and I don’t need gloves, and I don’t need a mask or whatever,’ and they end up in the emergency room.”

The emergency room?

“Oh yeah,” she says. “We get two or three calls every summer that somebody burned themselves with peppers, especially those little habaneros and those really hot Chinese cherries, those can really cause burns.”

Chili peppers can be rated on a scale of zero to almost 1.5 million Scoville heat units (SHU), which measures capsaicin. Bell peppers rate a wimpy zero; the latest world record holder — and it’s upped all the time — is the Trinidad Scorpion Butch T pepper at 1,463,700 SHU.

The danger of chili peppers doesn’t end with capsaicin. Preserving hot peppers by pickling them is a popular way to save summer spice through the winter, but peppers are a low-acid food, which makes them more vulnerable to botulism. They can still be handled safely, though.

“Don’t can them without vinegar if you’re making a pickled pepper,” Oehler advises, “or if you use a pressure canner, follow the directions for a low-acid food like green beans.”

Drying peppers for the winter is safer, and one of the easiest ways to use peppers because no pre-drying treatment is required. Oehler says that just stringing them across the garage is a perfectly decent drying method.

“They freeze pretty well depending on what you want to do with them, but they’re not going to stay crisp as if they were fresh,” Oehler says. That diminishes what peppers can do for the texture of salads, but as flavoring they’re untainted. Before storing this way, blanching peppers slows enzyme activity to keep them closer to their fresh flavor and texture.

Oehler recommends freezing and drying to penny-pinchers who want to avoid sky-high pepper prices in the winter. To save even more money, she says she’s had a pretty easy time growing them in the Willamette Valley climate, even in flower pots. ■



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