

The truth about hot peppers



Golden cayenne peppers are hot with a Scoville heat level of 30,000 to 50,000.

Photo/Bonnie Plants

By Melinda Myers

Don't be afraid to add a little spicy heat to your meals this season by growing a few hot peppers in the garden or containers. It's easier than you think and many of the hot pepper myths floating around the garden are simply not true.

Don't worry about your hot peppers heating up your sweet peppers. Peppers are normally self-pollinated. If an insect happens to move the pollen from a hot to sweet pepper, it will not affect the flavor or heat of this year's harvest. If you save the seeds from a cross-pollinated pepper and plant them in next year's garden, the plants they produce may have hot or sweet fruit (or a little of both), but only time will tell.

And don't assume all green peppers are sweet or you will be in for a surprise. Jalapenos are typically harvested when green and others, like habanero, Anaheim and Poblano are hot, whether harvested when green or red. You'll also find that hot peppers can be yellow, orange, brown and of course red.

You can turn down the heat when preparing your favorite recipes, too. Contrary to popular belief, all the heat in hot peppers does not come from the seeds. While partially true, the majority of the capsaicin that gives hot peppers their heat is in the white membrane that houses the seeds. When the seeds are growing they may also be coated with extra capsaicin from the membrane. So remove the white membrane and the seeds, just to be safe, if you want to turn down the heat.

The spicy heat of hot peppers is measured in Scoville Heat Units. The ratings are based on the amount of sugar water needed to neutralize the spicy heat in the extracted capsaicin that has been diluted in an alcohol-based extract. A panel of five taste testers decides when the spicy heat has been neutralized and then assigns the rating. Today many companies use a chemical process (liquid chromatography) but translate their results into the popular Scoville heat units.

The Scoville heat unit ratings vary from one type of hot pepper to another, with Poblano rating between 1000 to 2000, jalapenos 2500 to 6000, habaneros at 100,000 to 300,000 and one of the hottest, the ghost pepper, at 1,000,000 to 2,200,000 Scoville heat units. Check online or the Homegrown with Bonnie Plants mobile app (for iOS and Android) for the Scoville ratings, growing tips and a Pepper Chooser to help you pick the best varieties to grow. Ratings may also vary from individual plants within a specific type based on individual plant differences and the growing conditions.

Whatever kind you grow, be sure to label hot peppers when planting, harvesting and storing to avoid any mix-ups. The sweet banana pepper, for example, can easily be confused with

hot banana. This could make for an unwelcome surprise when preparing, serving and eating.

Also, consider wearing rubber gloves and avoid touching your face and eyes when working with hot peppers, as they can burn. Wash your hands, utensils and cutting boards when finished to avoid any future issues.

And don't worry if you are having a bad day when planting your hot peppers. Contrary to some old adages, planting hot peppers when you're angry won't make the peppers hotter, but unknowingly taking a bite of a hot pepper may very well change your mood.

Melinda Myers has more than 30 years of gardening experience has written over 20 gardening books, including "Small Space Gardening" and the "Midwest Gardener's Handbook".