

TOM'S GARDEN

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Peppers—Chilies—Capsicum

Are you growing “peppers” in your vegetable garden this summer? Well, maybe not!

The history of chili peppers is a surprising and fascinating story.

Chili peppers, also known as capsicums, originated in the Amazon jungles of South America where they were grown and cultivated by native people for thousands of years before being “discovered” by Christopher Columbus in the Caribbean in 1492.

It is hard for us to imagine that only 500 years ago, no one outside of Central or South America had even heard of a chili pepper.

A chili, or chili pepper, as it is commonly called, is the fruit of the capsicum plant. It is in the same botanic family (Solanaceae) as tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant, tomatillos, and many others.

In the United States and Britain, chilies are called peppers, but in other countries they are called by their proper name: capsicums. There are thousands of varieties from very small and hot to mild bell peppers, with many flavors and sizes in between. It is estimated that chilies have been part of the human diet since at least 5000 B.C.

Columbus traveled to the Americas on behalf of the Spanish, who were in search of spices because Portugal had cornered the

market on black pepper which was highly sought after and very expensive.

By the time Columbus arrived in the New World in 1492, chilies had already spread from South America into Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean. He thought their flavor to be similar to black peppercorns and mistakenly called the chilies peppers. Once trade started, the chilies made their way around the world and became very popular.

No ancient language—Arabic, Chinese, Persian, Hebrew, Greek, or Sanskrit—has a word for chili. Just over 500 years ago, no one in Europe, the Middle East, or Asia had ever seen or heard of chilies.

Chilies New World offering changed culinary history forever.

Today, India is the world's largest producer of chili pepper accounting for nearly 30 percent of production.

Due to an influx of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, Southeast Asia, and India, consumption of chilies in America has skyrocketed.

Saint Patrick's Day

This year St. Patrick's Day will be observed on March 17. Although the holiday originally started out as a Christian feast day celebrating the life of St. Patrick and the spreading of Christianity to Ireland, today it is a day of celebration for all things Irish. Remember to wear green!

St Patrick died in 493 A.D.

Legend says that St. Patrick used the three leaves of the shamrock to explain the Holy Trinity in his Teachings.

Long before St Patrick, the four-leaf clover was regarded by ancient Celts as a charm against evil spirits. In the early 1900s, O.H. Benson, an Iowa school superintendent, came up with the idea of using a clover as the emblem for a newly founded agricultural club for children in his area. In 1911, the four-leaf clover was chosen as the emblem for the national club program, later named 4-H.

Johnny Jump-ups (*Viola tricolor*)

Sometimes called pansies, they are charming, cool weather annuals that come in many colors with a variety of markings and sizes. They are usually compact, not more than 12 inches tall and wide and may self-seed. Pansy flowers can be single with no markings or can have a dark center called a face.



Avoid overhead watering with violas. They are perfect for mass planting in spring, for edging, and window boxes. They will bloom whenever the temperature is above freezing. Peak bloom is in spring as they thrive in cool weather. They fade and should be discarded with the start of hot summer weather.

Pansies generally have larger flowers than Johnny Jump-ups. Johnnies produce more smaller flowers and are more heat-tolerant. Part sun is OK, especially when summer heat arrives. Morning sun with afternoon shade is ideal.

Add manure, leaf mold or compost to the soil to make it rich.

If you purchase plants, choose those that are stocky with dark green foliage and have few blooms but many buds.

Plant them 6 to 8 inches apart, water well after planting and continue to keep them moist. Usually in spring there is enough rain to keep them happy, but in a window box or planter you should keep them watered.



Mulching is a good idea, even in a planter. Keep them dead-headed and enjoy the color and scent. Pinching off dead flowers and stem ends encourages bushier growth. Violas are edible so put them in a salad to give interest and color. Float them in cocktails or freeze them in ice cubes for a decorative touch at parties.

Fast Facts

Lupine also known as bluebonnet
Lupines attract pollinators, butterflies, are deer resistant, and low maintenance. There are perennial and annual lupines available. They are native to North America, blooming in late spring, April—June. Lupines grow 1 to 4 feet tall, prefer full sun, sandy and well-drained soil. They don't like clay soil because of their long taproot.

Loosen the soil deeply before planting. You can start them indoors and transplant the seedlings out after 4 to 6 weeks before they have developed the taproot.

Rub the seeds between two pieces of sandpaper to scarify them and soak in water overnight. Lupines need light to germinate so just press them into the planting medium and keep well-watered. I cover them with plastic wrap until they sprout. Deer really won't eat these plants!

Got Deer? Try Penstemons

Penstemon plants are often considered deer resistant due to several factors.

Bitter Taste

Penstemons contain compounds that contribute to a bitter taste. Deer tend to avoid plants with bitter flavors.

Aromatic foliage

Most penstemons have aromatic foliage. The strong scent emitted by the leaves can deter deer.

Texture

The texture of penstemon leaves is tough and hairy, making them less palatable to deer.

Penstemons are native to this region (North America.) Over time, these plants have developed features that make them less susceptible to deer browsing.

In areas with high deer populations, a combination of deer-resistant plants, deterrent strategies, and garden maintenance can make a big difference.

Aromatic Compounds in Penstemons

Penstemon plants, also known as beardtongue, produce aromatic compounds that give them their distinctive scent.

The plants release an alluring fragrance that is pleasing to humans and plays a crucial role in protecting them from browsing animals. These volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are highly effective in repelling herbivores because of their strong odors and bitter taste.



The beautiful flowers and foliage attracts hummingbirds and bees.

When deer or other animals encounter the scent of penstemon, they are instinctively repelled and discouraged from feeding on the plants.

Additionally, these compounds interfere with the deer's ability to detect other nearby food sources. The overpowering aroma can mask the scent of more desirable plants, reducing the likelihood of them targeting the area for foraging.

Keep in mind, nothing is deer-proof!

The Last Word

Two genetically engineered plants are now on the market to the public. A purple cherry tomato with deep color inside and out having healthy antioxidants found in blueberries, blackberries, and eggplant. Seeds are available:

www.NorfolkHealthyProduce.com

How about a petunia that glows in the dark? It emits a soft green glow visible after sunset. Plants: www.light.bio.