

Pepper, Chili—*Capsicum annuum* L. and *Capsicum frutescens* L.¹

James M. Stephens²

Early voyagers to the Americas, including Central America, Mexico, Peru, and Chile, found many forms of peppers, among them the hot ones. In Spain the hot peppers are called chili, meaning from Chile, and in India peppers in general are called chillies. In the United States, certain varieties of the hot peppers are called chili peppers .



Figure 1. Chili peppers
Credits: James M. Stephens

Most of the varieties of pepper referred to as chili peppers belong to *C. annuum* L. However, some varieties with chili included in their name are actually *C. frutescens* L. Precise categorization of this particular type of pepper is difficult because of the large number of varieties, and the constant creation of new ones by hybridization. Forms sold or grown by one name in certain areas of the country may not be the same elsewhere, even though the names are the same.

Description of Types

Chili constitutes one of the three main commercial types of hot-fleshed (pungent) peppers. The other two are cayenne and tabasco. The most popular chili varieties range from 3–7 inches long and have a maximum diameter of 1–2 inches. Strains of Mexican chilis that have been grown in the southwestern United States for many years are gradually being replaced by somewhat milder varieties with large smooth fruits easily peeled for canning. Other varieties of chili peppers range from cherry size to conical forms.

Some of the more common varieties follow.

The ‘Anaheim Chili’ has fruits about 7 inches long, 1½ inches in diameter, slightly tapered, stem end usually without pronounced shoulder but often wrinkled or folded. Flavor is mildly pungent as compared with other chili varieties. Anaheims take about 115 days to green mature and 150 days to red ripe and are also called ‘California Chili.’ ‘College No. 9 Chili,’ also called ‘New Mexico 9,’ has

1. This document is HS645, one of a series of the Horticultural Sciences Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date May 1994. Revised September 2015. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
2. James M. Stephens, professor emeritus, Horticultural Sciences Department, UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville FL 32611.

fruits about 5 inches long, 1¾ inches in diameter, tapered and pointed, shoulders sloping and usually smooth. These are less pungent than ‘Mexican Chili,’ but slightly more pungent than ‘Anaheim,’ with about the same maturity period as for ‘Anaheim.’ Mexican, or “native” chili has fruits about 3 inches by 1½ inches, somewhat conical, tapering to a blunt point. Pods generally have a deep shoulder at the stem and are often furrowed and wrinkled. Mexican chilis are the most pungent of the large-fruited chilis and strains are widely grown in the Southwest, and in central and northern Mexico, where they are preferred for earliness.

‘Chili No. 6’ was released by the New Mexico A.E.S. in 1950. This variety is superior in yield and pod shape to the older native varieties.

‘Red Chili’ has 2½-inch long, ½-inch in diameter pods that are green, turning red at maturity.

Other varieties include ‘Chili Chiltepin,’ ‘Chili Manzana,’ and ‘Chili Piquin.’ Some *C. frutescens* chili varieties are ‘Rat chili,’ ‘Common Chili,’ and ‘Christmas Bell.’ The latter was introduced from the Netherlands. It is a tall, thick-canopied green plant bearing large bell-blossom-ended, fluted fruits that are green turning to red. ‘Christmas Bell’ is fairly mild in pungency. ‘Habanero’ is alleged to be the hottest.

Culture

Chili peppers require about the same growing conditions as bell peppers in Florida, with a fairly long, warm growing season for best production. Plant in early spring after danger of frost in cold areas, and September–March in South Florida.

Start chili peppers from seeds or transplants. Best temperature for seed germination is 70–85°F. Fruit set is hampered by cool nights (below 60°F), which often occur in the winter season of South Florida.

Most gardeners find that only a few plants, perhaps one or two, of each variety are needed. These should be spaced 12–18 inches apart. If several rows are required, space them 30–36 inches apart (row center to row center). Planting two or three plants in a single hill is also acceptable.

Chili peppers are well adapted to growing in containers, for each plant is highly prolific, colorful, and generally attractive. Keep in mind, however, that the pods are very hot, resulting in possible danger for children with average curiosity. Therefore, hot peppers in containers should not

be placed along patios, near doorways, or in other areas accessible to small children.

Use

Because of their extreme pungency, chili pepper pods usually are not eaten alone, but are used for flavoring other foods. They may be picked red ripe and dehydrated (dried), or picked green (or red) for fresh use (cooking or canning). Drying can be accomplished by sunlight or in one of the many home dehydrating units on the market. Also, they are quite often pickled. A highly flavored mixture of chopped meat and beans is called “chili con carne,” meaning “chili with meat.”

Ornamental Purposes

All of the hot peppers are extremely decorative and colorful, some more so than others. Among the more attractive varieties are the following peppers listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Ornamental Varieties of Peppers

Jingle Bells	Treasures Red
Super Chili	Little Dickens
Little Dipper	Mirasol
NuMex Big Jim	Charleston Hot
NuMex Sunrise	Fiesta
NuMex Sunset	Poinsettia
NuMex Eclipse	Purple Serrano
NuMex Sunflare	Filius Blue
NuMex Sunglo	Holiday Time
NuMex Sunburst	Korean Hot
Firecracker	Bellingrath Gardens
Thai Hot	Variegata