

HOT PEPPER NAMED HERB OF THE YEAR

Kathleen Szabo, MGV '93

The International Herb Society has named the hot pepper (*Capsaicin ssp.*) as the 2016 herb of the year. But peppers aren't herbs, you may be thinking, as was I. So I consulted Merriam-Webster and found this definition of an herb: *a plant or a part of a plant that is used as medicine or to give flavor to food.* That certainly defines hot peppers. While there are many claims about the medicinal properties of capsaicin, as Master Gardeners, we cannot include those claims here. There is still much dispute about the effect of hot peppers on the body, with research being inconclusive. But, we can certainly discuss their popularity as a food.

As Latin and Asian cultures have spread through the U.S., hot peppers have become more and more popular. It's become a source of macho pride to see who can stand to eat the hottest pepper. Ghost peppers are showing up on national fast food menus. Hot peppers are not only popular culinary plants, but can be beautiful additions to a decorative garden. They come in a wide variety of colors from almost black like *Black Pearl* through purples, reds, oranges, yellows and even white. You will have several colors on one plant since the fruit changes color as it matures. *Numex* is a good example. I've seen miniature hot peppers used in a formal garden arrangement that was very appealing. The short varieties are also perfect for pots and mini gardens.

Peppers are fairly easy to grow. I start my seeds in sterile growing medium in flats in mid-March and grow them under florescent lights. After the first true leaves form I transplant them into individual pots. Single-serve yogurt containers are perfect. Just be sure to wash them well and soak them in a 5% chlorine solution before use. Styrofoam cups are also handy. Be sure to poke

some drainage holes into the bottom. Fill your containers with good potting soil. When the weather warms up, usually around the end of April, I put them in a cold frame until after mid May. June 1 is usually my planting day when I'm sure there is no danger from frosts. Plant in a sunny spot in good garden soil with some balanced fertilizer and keep them watered throughout the summer. The old farmers' use of Epsom's salts has been proven to cause more harm than good. You may need to stake the taller varieties. I've had no pest problems besides rabbits. Yes, they even eat hot peppers! A good fence solves that problem.



Photo courtesy of Pinterest showing Medusa hot peppers, Bright Lights Swiss Chard, and purple cabbage.

continued on next page

Peppers are easy to preserve. They freeze well. Just chop them up and throw them into a baggie. They can be dried, made into jellies and also pickled. *Be sure to use gloves. Those hot oils may not sting at first, but they sneak up on you. I learned that the hard way and spent a night with my hands soaking in cold milk. Also be sure to keep gloved hands away from your eyes and other tender body parts.*

This summer try growing some hot peppers. If you can't stand the heat, enjoy their beauty and give the fruit to more adventurous neighbors. Seeds and plants are easily found online or locally.



www.wikihow.com

Editor's Note: Read last month's Trumpet Vine to discover how effectively capsaicin deters deer when used in a variety of store-bought and home-made solutions.