About – For at least 9,500 years, chili peppers have been a part of man’s diet in the Americas. They were among the first crops to be domesticated in Mexico and Central America. European explorers, including Christopher Columbus, are credited with spreading chili peppers to the far reaches of the globe. Countries such as India, China, Japan, Korea and the Philippines quickly integrated chilis into the local cuisine.

These members of the Capsicum genus of plants, while related to sweet bell peppers, are anything but sweet. The fiery nature of chili peppers even led to the development of a method to measure their “hotness.” In 1912, chemist Wilbur Scoville developed the Scoville Scale. Of course, any discussion of chili peppers leads to the question of which variety is the hottest. With a rating of 1,001,304, Scoville Heat Units (SHU), the Naga Jolokia from India wins that honor.

Varieties – There are in excess of 200 varieties of chili peppers. Here are just a few of the more common varieties found in supermarkets across the United States. They are listed from hottest to mildest based on their Scoville Heat Units.

Habanero: 100,000–500,000 SHU. These are without a doubt among the hottest chilies on earth. At approximately 2 inches in length and 1½ inch in diameter, these diminutive chilies are “pure fire.” When ripe, they vary in color from dark green to orange to red-orange to red.

Thai: 50,000–100,000 SHU. These peppers are also extremely hot. They are quite slender and vary from green to red in color. The length varies from 3 to 5 inches.

Caribe: 30,000–50,000 SHU. This bright yellow Caribbean variety gets its name from the tribe of Indians that inhabited the growing area during the time of Columbus.

Red Fresno: 15,000–30,000 SHU. This bright red California variety looks very similar to a Red Jalapeno, but closer examination shows broader shoulders and thinner skin.

Serrano: 10,000–22,000 SHU. These small, slender green chilies are a favorite for salsas. Usually Serranos are 2 to 3 inches in length and ½ inch in diameter.

Jalapeno: 2,500–8,000 SHU. Perhaps the most popular chili in the United States, they are found in a variety of dishes. Dark green in color, they vary from 2 to 3 inches in length and ¼ to 1 inch in diameter. When fully ripe they turn bright red.

Poplano: 1,000–1,500 SHU. Also called Pasilla, this large chili pepper is dark green in color. They vary from 5 to 9 inches in length and 1 ½ to 2 inches in diameter. Relatively mild, they are used extensively in Latin cuisine.

Anaheim: 500–1,000 SHU. As its name states, these chilies originated in Anaheim, California. They are medium green in color and 6 to 8 inches long. Uses include stuffing for “chili rellenos.”

Selection – Most varieties of fresh chilies are available year-round. When one is purchasing fresh chili peppers, look for peppers that are firm and glossy. Avoid peppers that are shriveled, limp or showing signs of decay. When handling the hottest varieties like Habaneros, avoid touching them when placing them in a plastic produce bag. First, turn the bag inside out and insert your hand in the bag, using it like a glove to pick them up. After handling any chili peppers avoid contact with your eyes and face and wash your hands thoroughly.

Storage – Chili peppers can be stored in a paper or plastic bag for up to 5 days in the crisper section of the refrigerator. Serranos and Habaneros will usually keep up to two weeks.

Preparation and Uses – Chilis are most commonly combined with other ingredients in cooking. They are used raw in sauces and salsas as well as cooked in a variety of dishes. Chilies can be smoked (Chipotle are smoked Jalapenos) as well as dried for later use. We find widespread use of chilies in Mexican, Caribbean, Indian, Thai and Korean cuisine. When handling very hot varieties, it is advisable to wear rubber gloves.

Nutrition – Chili peppers are an excellent source of vitamin A, vitamin C and vitamin B6. They are low in calories (20) and contain no fat. Some research suggests that eating chili peppers lowers blood sugar and, therefore, they may also be useful in the fight against diabetes.

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