

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



July 12, 2017



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*News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.*

PHOTO CREDIT: Gene Speller

Peppers are perhaps the most diverse of all our vegetables grown in home gardens. Peppers may be sweet and mellow or fiery hot, depending on variety, and are easy to grow in the home garden. Master Gardener Gene Speller will provide a pepper presentation and tasting on Saturday, July 15, from 9:00 a.m. - 12 Noon at the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office in Carbide Park.

Gene Speller is a longtime resident of League City, a longtime friend and an accomplished home gardener.

Gene is also a Master Gardener volunteer and I refer to him as being a pepper whisperer. Like many Master Gardeners, Gene has assimilated a wealth of knowledge and firsthand experience in growing a

particular group of vegetable.

Gene has become our go-to-person for addressing questions related to peppers. He will share his knowledge and firsthand experience with fellow gardeners across the county at the upcoming program entitled "The Great Pepper Extravaganza . . . A Seminar &

Tasting" to be held on Saturday, July 15, from 9:00 a.m. - 12 Noon. His program will be conducted at the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office located in Carbide Park (4102-B Main St. in La Marque). In addition to discussing how to grow peppers, Gene will have a tasting display of salsa, pickled peppers and pep-

per vinegar that he has prepared. Pre-registration is required (phone: 281-309-5065 or e-mail: gal-countymgs@gmail.com) to ensure the availability of handouts.

A home garden in Texas just wouldn't be complete without a few pepper plants. Based on sales of vegetables at our Spring Plant Sale this year, I surmised that many local gardeners grow both hot and sweet peppers.

I recall discussions with volunteers about how many trays of this type of pepper and how many of that type of pepper should we order for the sale. We all smiled when deciding how many trays of hot peppers should be ordered. Yes, we decided to order multiple trays of jalapeño peppers (which are hot) and even habanero peppers (even hotter).

But when it came to deciding whether to order the hottest pepper on record at that time, I must admit we delayed a bit on that decision. The very name of the variety itself made us consider whether any gardener would be interested in growing it. That name was Trinidad Moruga Scorpion and indeed it was cited as being the hottest chili pepper available.

We ordered a tray of this variety and all 36 Trinidad Moruga Scorpion pepper transplants were scooped up by area gardeners within a few minutes after the sale started.

We should not have been surprised as Texans across the state have appreciated the enjoyable qualities of spicy foods for generations, and

peppers from your backyard garden can help contribute to that culinary tradition.

The fire in Texas cuisine is provided primarily by hot peppers or products made from them like hot sauce. So, a backyard garden here wouldn't be complete without a few pepper plants —both hot and sweet—to pick from.

The pepper is native to the tropics of Central and South America and has probably been cultivated for thousands of years. Archaeologists exploring prehistoric caves in Peru have found remains of pepper seeds, and evidence of cultivated peppers has also been found in other ancient sites.

When Christopher Columbus reached the Caribbean, he tasted a vegetable being grown by the native population. Its sharp taste reminded him of the familiar black pepper, so he called the new plant "pepper" (pimiento in Spanish).

Columbus was an exceptional explorer; however, he was not a horticulturist as he erred on naming the new plants pepper. Wrong or not, these plants are still commonly called peppers. The pepper plants we commonly grow in home gardens are not even related to black pepper (*Piper nigrum*) but are an entirely different plant (*Capsicum annuum*).

From their American origins, peppers were spread to Europe, Africa, India and Asia, and became an important part of many regional

cuisines. Peppers are members of the Solanaceae (or Nightshade) family of plants, which makes them relatives of the tomato, potato, tobacco, eggplant and petunia.

The fruit of pepper plants may be sweet, mild, hot or very hot. The degree of heat is related to the amount of capsaicin present. This chemical is concentrated in the pepper pod where the seeds are attached and in the veins of the inner wall. Peppers are at the peak of their hotness when fully ripe, and are usually five times hotter when they are mature than while green.

By growing an assortment of varieties, you can have mild, meaty peppers for salads or stir-fries, slightly spicy peppers for fresh salsas, and hot peppers for bold jolts of flavor.

Peppers can be grown in pots on a balcony or patio and look great in a flower bed or herb garden. If you have a sunny place in the garden or even an apartment balcony, give peppers a try.

Be sure to attend Gene Speller's Pepper Seminar and Tasting on Saturday to learn how to get started with growing your own peppers.