

## **NMSU's chile pepper garden a hot summer attraction**

*July 26, 2011*

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Chile peppers are beginning to ripen in the Mesilla Valley as we move into August. Some are even ready for harvest. It is also the traditional time for New Mexico State University's chile pepper teaching and demonstration garden to be opened to the public.

The state's signature crop and an essential ingredient in New Mexican cuisine, the chile pepper has been the object of education and research at NMSU since the late 1800s, when Fabian Garcia was beginning his horticulture career there. Indeed, the university "has the longest continuous program of chile pepper improvement in the world," according to Paul Bosland, who currently heads up that breeding program. He is also the director of the Chile Pepper Institute, the official sponsor of the Chile Pepper Institute Teaching and Demonstration Garden.

The NMSU Chile Pepper Breeding and Genetics Program is known by growers and local Mexican and New Mexican food aficionados for developing new chile pepper varieties and for reintroducing heirloom New Mexican chiles like NuMex Heritage Big Jim and NuMex Heritage 6-4, favorite choices for a flavorful chile relleno. CPI is nationally known for its work, including the development of "Holy Jolokia" products made from the fiery Bhut Jolokia chile pepper, the first chile pepper to break the one million scoville heat level.

Interested residents and visitors to the area are invited to find out more about chile peppers - and even take a "hands-off" self-

guided chile pepper tour - at the garden, appropriately located on the grounds of NMSU's Fabian Garcia Research Center in Las Cruces.

The garden showcases a selection of more than 150 varieties of chile peppers, used as ornamentals, vegetables and to spice up other foods. The ones developed for flavor range in spiciness from mild-mannered bell and banana peppers, through more assertive cayenne, tabasco and poblano chile peppers, to jalapeno, serrano and habanero. Bhut Jolokia is represented, along with a few contenders for the status of "world's hottest chile pepper."

The theme of this year's garden is "Chile Pepper Flavor From Around the World." Visitors will find chile peppers whose names refer to Europe (Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Spain), the Caribbean (Cuba, Jamaica, Tobago, Trinidad), and various places in New Mexico (Chimayo, Mesilla, Santa Fe, Zia Pueblo), as well as other points on the globe.

"This year's theme will highlight the subtle but important flavor differences among chile pepper varieties," said Bosland. "People may not realize that chile peppers have notes of apple, citrus, prune, smoke, grass, etc. in the different varieties. Some chile peppers have fruit walls that are sugary sweet, while others are as bitter as quinine."

Prominently featured are nearly 40 NuMex varieties, all of which were developed at NMSU. Their names often evoke their colorful natures: NuMex Garnet, Pinata, Sunrise, Sunburst, Suave Red and Suave Orange. Many of the ornamentals are tied to holidays, such as NuMex Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter and St. Patrick's Day. (Until otherwise instructed, one should perhaps proceed with caution around the NuMex Trick or Treat and April Fool's Day varieties.) Observant visitors will also notice a few eggplant varieties along one edge of the plot.

The garden has been available to the public from late July through October every year since 1993. NMSU students transplant the chile pepper specimens from greenhouses in early May and maintain them throughout the growing season.

"The garden is toured by school groups, 4-H groups and Future Farmers of America groups, plus NMSU students, elder hostel groups and hundreds of chileheads," Bosland said. It has also received attention from television shows on the Food Network, the History Channel and HGTV. Rand McNally's 2010 Road Atlas listed the garden as a "must-see" destination in Las Cruces.

Hours for visiting the garden are from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and 9 a.m. to 4 a.m. on weekends. The Fabian Garcia Research Center is located at 109 W. University Ave. Admission is free for the self-guided tour. Guided tours, hosted by chile pepper experts, are also available in exchange for a donation to the CPI. Anyone interested in this option should contact Danise Coon, [hotchile@nmsu.edu](mailto:hotchile@nmsu.edu), 575-646-3028.

To learn more about chile peppers, the Chile Pepper Institute and the teaching and demonstration garden, go to <http://www.chilepepperinstitute.org/>