

Food Facts: Farmers Market Fun Family Foods

By Louise Donato, WVU Extension Agent, Marion County,
and Paula Strawder, WVU Extension Agent, Wood County



About Peppers History

Christopher Columbus encountered this vegetable on one of his voyages to the Caribbean. He called them “peppers” because they were similar in taste to the Old World black peppers.

The Plant

The substance that gives chili peppers their intensity is capsaicin. The “heat” of chili peppers is measured in Scoville heat units (SHU), which is the number of times a chili extract must be diluted in water for it to lose its heat. Bell peppers rank at 0 SHU, New Mexico green chilis at about 1,500 SHU, jalapeños at 3,000 to 6,000 SHU, and habaneros at 300,000 SHU. The record for the hottest chili pepper, from northeastern India, measured more than 1,000,000 SHU.

Produce in this family ranges from the common sweet bell pepper to the extremely hot chili pepper. Although sold while they are still green, bell peppers will turn a bright red if allowed to fully mature. All peppers are good sources of vitamin A and vitamin C, but red peppers contain more of these two vitamins than do green peppers.

How to Buy

When possible, buy peppers that have been grown locally. Inspect the peppers one by one to make sure those you take home are of prime quality. Choose peppers with a radiant appearance and without blemishes. If two peppers are of equal size and one is heavier, the heavier pepper will be more succulent because it retains more moisture. A good rule to follow is to select peppers as close to the same size as possible – this ensures even cooking, even after they are cut into pieces.

How to Prepare

Green peppers are flavorful and colorful additions to salads, soups, dips, and casseroles. Remove the stems, seeds, and inner membranes of bell peppers before using. Precook bell peppers that will be stuffed by immersing in boiling water for three to five minutes.

Fresh or dried hot peppers must be handled very carefully because oil from the peppers can burn the eyes and skin. It is a good idea to wear rubber gloves and hold hot peppers under cold running water during preparation. Cook hot peppers as directed in specific recipes.

How to Store

Fresh peppers are still very much alive when you bring them into your kitchen. A cold, moist environment helps keep their tissue vibrant.

To store, wrap peppers in barely moist paper towels; then place them in a sealed perforated plastic bag in a closed refrigerator crisper. If the pepper comes wrapped in cellophane, remove the wrapper and place the pepper in barely moist paper towels. Then put it in a sealed perforated plastic bag.

First published May 2010

For further information contact Louise Donato, WVU Extension Service Agent, at 304-367-2772 or Paula Strawder WVU Extension Service Agent, at 304-424-1960 or www.ext.wvu.edu