

Capsicum

Solanaceae

Capsicum is derived from Greek *kapto* (to bite) with reference to the hot pungent taste of many of the species.

It is now believed that all the different cultivated varieties of capsicums (with their varying size, shape, colour, flavour and pungency) are likely to be derived from one species native to the West Indies, and Central and South America. It was thought that there were at least 40 varieties in the 17th Century, and Mexico, where a small pea-like (*Pisum sativum*), hot capsicum was being used in food as early as 7000 BC (and was being cultivated from at least 3500 BC) is said to use 92 of the 200 odd some claim now exist. As a result the botanical classifications of the different varieties, and their associated common names, can be extremely confusing.

For Europeans these plants were first mentioned by the fleet's doctor, Chanca, when the Spanish-sponsored Genoese explorer, Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) made his second voyage to the West Indies in 1494. At that time he recorded the use to which the inhabitants of the West Indies then put the plant. Twenty-five years later when the Spanish explorer, Ferdinand Magellan (c.1480-1521) made an expedition to circumnavigate the world, he carried the chilli pepper from South America to Asia and Africa.

In the 16th Century capsicums spread through Europe in a strange fashion. For instance they were introduced to Hungary (a country celebrated today for paprika which was adopted as their national spice) by the occupying Turks, via the eastern end of the Mediterranean which the capsicum family had reached quite rapidly once the Spanish had brought it across the Atlantic. In the following Century capsicums could be found in Bulgaria.

Other peppers not specifically mentioned below include:-

Ancho – has heart-shaped fruit with a spicy, mild flavour.

Chinese lantern pepper – has fruit with a fairly strong flavour.

Chipotle – has conical, brick red fruit that have a piquant flavour.

Crushed red pepper – is a spice provided in pizza restaurants, is a ground blend of seeds of the hotter varieties of capsicums.

Malgueta – is found particularly in Bahia, Brazil, and the fruit are very hot and stringy.

Mild green chilli pepper – has about 3 in. long, pointed fruit with a flavour more mild than **mild red chilli pepper**.

Mild red chilli pepper, Felfel (Arabic), Pili-pili (French) – grows in North Africa (where it is known as *Felfel*) and southern France, and has about 3 in. long, pointed fruit which have a strong flavour, although not as pungent as most other varieties.

Pequin – has tiny scarlet fruit and a very fiery flavour and should only be used dried.

Poblano – has quite large, dark red, scented fruit.

Seven courts-bouillon pepper – has fruit with a fairly strong flavour.

Tabasco – is one of the main ingredients in 'Tabasco sauce'.

West Indian pepper, Cherry pepper – has about 1 in. long, irregularly-shaped bright red fruit that have a very strong hot flavour.

Zozio pepper, Parrot's tongue – has fruit with a fairly strong flavour.

Capsicum peppers for the American Indians in the New World were synonymous with grains of paradise (*Aframomum melegueta*) or pepper (*Piper nigrum*) for the Old World inhabitants. When the Spanish conquistadors first encountered the Mayas and the Aztecs both used capsicums to spice their chocolate (*Theobroma cacao*) – and many of their foods. They and the Inkas had also used the very hot spices in some of their torturing techniques, and as a fishing poison. Many of the Indian tribes, including some in North America, not only used various peppers as flavouring but as medicine too. No doubt the North American Tohono O’Odham Indians were not alone in harvesting it as a cash crop for bartering.

Once peppers infiltrated the rest of the World they came to be essential ingredients in many national dishes eg. Hungary’s goulash, a Chinese oil and a fruit dish, an Arabian couscous dish, in Indian chutneys and curries, and a Moroccan fruit salad. While in the Americas themselves peppers feature particularly in Mexican sauces, and Brazilian fruit salads.

Peppers were also used medicinally. In Africa they came to be valued as a treatment for diarrhoea, intestinal infections, parasites, piles and healing wounds. Its application for piles was also adopted by some European herbalists.