CHILTEPIN PEPPERS

The Chiltepin Pepper (Capsicum annuum var. glabriusculum) grows wild in Mexico and the Southwestern United States. There are less than 15 known localities in the US that are natural habitats for wild chiles. It is thought to be one of the oldest chili peppers and the "mother" of many of the domesticated peppers such as the jalapeno and bell peppers. It is the only native chili pepper growing wild in southern Arizona. There is a population of the Chiltepin living wild in a 2,500 acre protected area of the Rock Corral Valley of the Tumacacori Mountains. The protected area was established in 1999 as the Wild Chile Botanical Area by the Coronado National Forest to provide habitat for the largest population of Chiltepin chili peppers north of Mexico. The Botanical Area is on a south facing slope which helps protect the plants from freezing since they are warmed by the low winter sun.

The Chiltepin plant is perennial and can live for 35 or more years if not subjected to a hard frost. The plants grow on the rocky surfaces of steep slopes and are difficult to find because they grow in and among other shrubs. This is because they are sensitive to direct sun and rely on "nurse" plants to thrive. Depending on environmental conditions, the plant may vary from 2 to 4 feet tall. The berries (peppers) are small, fairly round and about a third of an inch in diameter. Chiltepin in the Aztec language means "flea chili". Tumacacori, the location of the Chili Botanical Area, translates to "place of the little round chili" in the O'Odham language. Immature berries are green but are orange-red to red in color when ripe, Figure 1 is a Wikipedia image of a Chiltepin Pepper plant. Figure 2 is a photograph of a Chiltepin plant growing in the Wild Chile Botanical Area near the Rock Corral The heat of the Chiltepin Pepper is hot (50,000 to 100,000 on the Scoville heat scale), very intense and immediate but is not very long lasting. . In comparison, the Habanero is rated at 80,000 to 350,000 Scoville units.

Fig. 1 Chiltepin Peppers

The heat of wild Chiltepins though will also vary significantly depending on their growing environment. The amount of rainfall during fruit formation significantly affects the heat level and the amount of fruit produced. The drier the year, the milder the pepper and the smaller the yield.

Fig. 2 Wild Growing Chilltepin Pepper

Animals avoid the plants because of the heat of the fruit. Birds are not affected by the heat of the berries and consume them whole. This significantly enhances the survivability of the plants as the birds then disperse the seeds throughout the area. Consuming many of the berries also helps the birds in that it makes them distasteful to predators.

In addition to being used in food preparation, Chiltepin peppers were used for medicinal purposes. They were widely used as a remedy for acid indigestion and said to be very healthful and a general tonic for the digestive system. The Tarahumara Indians believed that Chiltepin peppers were the greatest protection against the evils of sorcery. One of their proverbs holds, "the man who does not eat chile is immediately suspected of being a sorcerer"
The peppers of the wild Chiltepin plants in the Botanical Area can be collected for personal consumption but it is illegal to sell them.

Summary prepared by T. Johnson from a Nogales International article by Arielle Zionts and various web sites such as Wikipedia, Chiltpin.us, and the US Forest Service. The photo in Figure 2 by Jim Chisholm