



Peppers

Peppers are related to tomatoes, aubergines and potatoes. They come from a flowering plant native to the Americas that is now grown all over the world. The flowerheads of the plant develop into colourful fruits, inside which are seeds that allow the plant to reproduce. Despite the fact that they are fruits, peppers are usually found amongst the vegetables in the supermarket. In cooking terms they are considered to be a vegetable. There are many varieties of pepper. Generally, the 'cool' peppers are known as bell or capsicum peppers and the 'hot' peppers are known as chilli peppers. In Ireland, the most frequently eaten pepper is the bell pepper, which comes in a variety of colours - red, green, yellow or orange.



Bell peppers

Too hot to handle?

In 1912, William Scoville devised a special scale to measure the heat of a pepper. Known as the Scoville scale, it measures the amount of capsaicin (the heat-causing substance) in the pepper and records it in Scoville heat units (SHU). To give an idea of the scale here are some examples: the bell pepper contains no heat and measures 0 SHU on the scale. Original Tabasco sauce measures 2,500-5,000 SHU and cayenne pepper measures 30,000-50,000 SHU. The hottest pepper in the world is the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion pepper which measures over 1,200,000 SHU but this may change as scientists are continually trying to grow hotter and hotter varieties of pepper. Other peppers over 1,000,000 SHU include the Ghost Pepper (Bhut Jolokia), Naga Viper, Infinity Chilli and Chocolate 7-Pot. Contact with chilli peppers can cause severe irritation on the skin and in the eyes so great care must be taken when handling them and hands should be washed immediately afterwards!



Turning up the heat

Other than the bell pepper, most peppers when eaten cause a burning sensation in the mouth. This is caused by a chemical substance known as *capsaicin*. Bell peppers are the only peppers not to contain this substance. The purpose of the heat is to protect the fruits from consumption by mammals. This allows birds, which are unaffected by the heat, to help the plant produce. Attracted by the rich colour, they eat the fruits and disperse the seed far and wide.

Cooking up a storm

Bell peppers are great for cooking and are very good for you as they have a very high content of Vitamin C. They can be eaten raw or cooked. Raw and chopped into slices, they are great in salads and in wraps. They are also great cooked in stir fries, stuffed and baked or in omelettes. Chilli peppers are used to add spicy heat to dishes but the heat can be too hot for some!



Medicinal

Peppers have been valued for their medicinal properties for thousands of years. They have been used to treat heart ailments, provide pain relief, reduce inflammation and treat colds and sore throats.

No Relation!

The white and black pepper that we sprinkle on food is not related to the capsicum pepper. They are made from ground peppercorns from the *Piper nigrum* vine, which is native to India.

