



HOW TO GROW *Chiltepines*

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Native Seeds/SEARCH seeks to find, protect and preserve the seeds of the people of the Greater Southwest so that these arid adapted crops may benefit all peoples and nourish a changing world.

Chiltepines (*Capsicum annuum* var. *glabriusculum*), also called chile tepins, are tiny, pea sized wild chiles native to the borderlands though northern South America. Most domesticated chiles and peppers are descended from wild chiltepines thanks to ancient seed savers and plant breeders who began to domesticate chiles 7,000 years ago in central Mexico. Heat level can vary depending on the plant and the amount of water but in general chiltepines are very hot – ranking similarly to habaneros. They have a distinctive smoky flavor.

Chiltepines are synonymous with Sonoran cuisine. Typically eaten in as crushed flakes after they have dried or green fruits preserved in vinegar, chiltepines are added to salsas, soups, or cheese. But they can add a special flavor kick to any dish.

Chiltepin popularity as a regional spice and importance for agricultural history has earned them a central place in Southwestern gardens. Once established, they are easy to grow and require little care. If you don't like spicy food, you can grow them for birds who love them! Chiltepines are often called bird peppers.

SEED GERMINATION TIPS

Like many wild seeds, germination can be challenging. Start seeds in small cups or seed trays by planting ¼" deep in sandy soil. Keep seeds moist, but not oversaturated. Two factors will help – warmth and patience. A greenhouse or grow mat helps with winter or early spring seed starting, or wait for warmer weather to start. Chiltepines take longer to germinate than domesticated chiles so be patient and keep moist. You may not see evidence of sprouts for several weeks.

Scarification of the seeds can aid in germination. In the wild, fruits are eaten by birds (who do not taste the capsicum) and the seeds readily germinate after passing through their digestive tract. You can mimic this at home by feeding to your chickens, however it might be difficult to recover the seeds! The seed coat can also be penetrated by gently rubbing seeds on light sandpaper or soaking for a few hours in a ¼ cup of water with a drop of vinegar. In our germination procedures at NS/S we have found that scarification treatments are unnecessary if adequate warmth and time are provided.



GROWING INFORMATION

In the wild, chiltepines grow under a nurse plant such as hackberry or mesquite tree. Mimic these conditions at home by planting under a tree or another area that receives filtered light such as a south facing wall. Chiltepines do not tolerate extended time under direct sun in the low desert. In cooler climates, full sun is appropriate. Soils should be well drained.

Plants will range in size from a few feet up to 10 feet tall if ideal conditions are met. Chiltepines are frost sensitive but so long as the root ball does not freeze they will live for years to decades. Prune away frost damage to promote new growth. In colder climates, grow in a container that can be brought inside during the winter.

Chile harvest is concentrated around early Fall.

SEED SAVING

Allow the fruits to dry on the plant to ensure seed maturity. Seed extraction will also be easier than when the oils are fresh. Pick the fruits that have dried and turned from bright to a dull red. Open fruits to separate seeds and further dry before sealing in an air-tight container to prevent mold. Seed germination will improve if seeds are allowed to fully dry before starting.

Chiltepines are self-pollinating but insects will cross with other varieties of any *Capsicum annuum* so isolate varieties by 500 feet or bag blossoms to maintain purity.