



## **Desert Harvest**

**By**  
**Donna Derosia**

OK-So do you like it hot? I mean REALLY hot? This month's little desert jewel is called the chiltepine. It is technically known as *Capsicum annum* var. *glabriusculum*. It is native to this region as far north as the Atacosa Mountains just to the east of the Sierrita Mountains, in Chiltepine Canyon on the east side of the Baboquivari Mountains & in other canyons to the west side of the mountains on the Tohono O'Odham Reservation. In 1999 the U.S. Forest Service established a 2500 acre Wild Chile Botanical Area in the Atacosa Mountains for the preservation of our local variety which includes up to 1200 wild chile plants.

Chiltepinies are known as the mother of all chiles because it is known as the closest living relative of the earliest form of domesticated chiles. They have been grown & harvested by native peoples for thousands of years. They grow as a nurse plant to larger trees for protection from the extreme heat & cold in canyons & near washes.

They fall within the range of 50,000 to 100,000 Scoville heat units which is a measurement that indicates the amount of capsaicin present. Capsaicin is a chemical compound that acts as a powerful stimulant either when applied externally or ingested internally. This fiery pepper has been known throughout history for its soothing & restorative effects on the digestive system & effective on treating fevers. It is known for being a harmless internal disinfectant. Ounce per ounce they have more vitamin A & C than anything else you can grow in your garden. They are also full of riboflavin, protein & fiber. It has also been known to be effective when applied as a poultice externally for sore joints or for treatment of arthritis.

They are a critical food source for many native bird species. Birds are impervious to the capsaicin & are the primary seed propagators. The digestive system in the birds breaks down the tough outer protection of the seed & provides easier germination of the seeds. If you want to grow & collect chiltepinies I would suggest you collect the tiny peppers as they are just turning red or they will turn into bird food. The seeds are available locally from Native Seed Search in the true Sonoran variety. They can also be purchased for culinary use but can fetch up to \$72/ LB. They can be used in salsa, crushed over eggs, added to beans for a little zing-or if you're adventurous why not try to make some homemade yogurt or ice cream & add them to create your own local gastronomic sensation.

If you'd like to see a sample of chiltepinies feel free to stop by the Kestrel Kafé & Market. I also have a sample of last month's seeds (Amaramth).