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Gardening with Datil Peppers

Terra Freeman
Urban and Commercial Horticulture Agent
UF/IFAS Extension St. Johns County

Datil Pepper History and Use

While the exact origin of the datil pepper is unknown, local legend says it was brought to Florida from Spain by Minorcans. A rich cultural history surrounds this unique fruit in the St. Augustine area, which is known for its Minorcan heritage and cuisine. It is popularly made into hot sauces, jellies, relishes, barbeque sauces and mustards. With a heat index that matches the habanero at around 100,000 to 300,000 units on the Scoville scale, the datil pepper certainly has a kick!

Gardening with Datil Pepper Plants

The datil pepper plant, *Capsicum sinense*, produces relatively small peppers ranging from ½ to 4 inches long. The bright yellow-orange fruit varies from spherical to oblong in shape, and possesses a unique sweet, fruity tang in addition to its spicy flavor.

Gardening practices for datil pepper plants are similar to those of other hot and mild peppers. Seeds require warm soil temperatures (75 – 80 degrees F) for germination to be successful and can be started indoors in the late winter and transplanted after danger of frost has ceased. A second crop can be sown midsummer for an early fall planting.

Sow seeds ¼ inch deep in a sterile potting media, then place in a warm environment out of direct sunlight. Keep soil moist, but not wet, while patiently waiting 10 to 20 days for germination to take place. Once seeds have germinated, move them to a sunny location.

Once the first set of true leaves emerge, transition seedlings into 2 to 4 inch pots and begin fertilizing at half strength. In order to accommodate root growth and assure proper soil moisture holding capacity, be sure to transition plants into larger pots as they grow, or transplant into the ground once frost- free.

If planting in ground, set plants 12 to 24 inches apart in a location that provides full sun to light afternoon shade with a pH around 6.5. Fertilize after transplanting, and again two to three times throughout the growing season. Datil pepper plants range from 1 ½ to 2 ½ feet tall and require around 5 months of frost-free weather to mature.

Seed Saving: Wear gloves! Slice open the mature fruit and spread its seeds onto clean newspaper. Allow seeds to dry in a warm, dry place for several days, then store in a cool, dry location.

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Harvesting Datil Peppers

Datil peppers take on a variety of hues as they mature. They will morph from olive green to lime green with a purple stripe when they are close to maturity. They can be harvested at this stage, or kept on the vine until they exhibit a bright yellow or glowing orange color, which is when flavor is said to be at its peak. Harvesting frequently will encourage plants to produce more fruit. Be careful when handling the fruit, as the capsaicin can be irritating to eyes and other body parts.

Scoville Scale Ranking

Capsaicin is what gives hot peppers their spicy flavor, which is measured on a heat index known as the Scoville scale. Mild peppers rank between 1,000 and 10,000 Scoville units, whereas spicier peppers can measure between 50,000 and 250,000 units. While the heat index of the datil pepper is similar to the habanero at around 100,000 to 300,000 Scoville units, extremely spicy hot peppers, such as the Carolina Reaper, can measure over 2 million Scoville units!

References:

Pepper, Datil-*Capsicum sinense* Jacques: http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/mv113

Peppers: http://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/edibles/vegetables/peppers.html

Photo credit: William McIntosh, UF/IFAS Extension St. Johns County Master Gardener

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