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A peck of pickled peppers

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Hugo Feed Mill manager Steve Marier grows 68 potted exotic pepper plants in his driveway. - *Photo by Debra Neutkens*

HUGO — His friends call Steve Marier “Dr. Pepper.”

The Feed Mill manager hesitates to call it an obsession, but Marier does admit to a fondness that borders on addiction for exotic peppers.

Sixty-eight potted pepper plants line his driveway near City Hall. They originate from all over the world: Japan, Vietnam, India, Brazil, Columbia, Peru and Mexico. With the exception of one sweet variety, all are hot. Really hot.

Marier explained that chili peppers are rated on a hotness scale called Scoville units, named after the American chemist who invented the test. The hottest pepper in the world has over one million Scoville units. Called Bhut Jolokia, Marier has three pots of it. A toothpick dipped in a powdered piece left one of his friends gasping. The pepper is so hot in fact, it's used in India in non-lethal hand grenades and pepper spray for self defense.

The potted pepper hobby started about 15 years ago with some Caribbean seeds and a half-dozen pots. Many of the foreign varieties take 100 or more days to mature so Marier must start them indoors, moving pots outside as weather permits.

He pickles, powders and dehydrates the peppers, makes jelly, spices and gallons of salsa. Ground peppers are sprinkled on almonds he slow roasts in a crock pot or used to season jerky and other meats. "They add flavor," Marier said. "Heat and flavor."

A website called Uncle Steve's Hot Stuff explains that capsaicin is the substance that make peppers hot. Pure capsaicin is between 15 to 16 million Scoville units. Research shows capsaicin triggers a pain signal at the cellular level similar to a heat burn. Exposure lowers sensitivity to pain and repeated doses of capsaicin leads to increased tolerance of hot foods.

"When not overpowered by the heat factor, the palate now explores the many diverse flavors offered by the myriad chilies available from around the world," writes Uncle Steve on the website. "Also for some 'chili-heads', a good jolt of capsaicin excites the nervous system into producing endorphins, which promote a pleasant sense of well being. The endorphin 'high' makes spicy foods mildly addictive and for some, an obsession."

Marier's affection for the plant starts with its appearance. "I like the look of a pepper plant," he said. "I thought it was neat doing something exotic — to get plants from somewhere else and grow them here."

An acquaintance with a similar passion grew hundreds of pepper varieties in Belle Plaine and was Marier's first source for plants. The man since has died, but Marier recalled seeing his 400 varieties of peppers for the first time. He was like a kid in a candy store. "More like standing before a beer cooler on a hot summer day," Marier quipped.

About 50 of his plants are different varieties of habaneros, hot peppers that fall mid-range on the Scoville scale. Marier likes the chili for salsa, something he started making back in the '90s.

“I got salsa recipes from ladies in town and my aunt Joan. Some years I’ll make 500 jars of stuff. It’s time consuming, but if you love it, you find time.”

Most of his salsa is given away to friends and family as gifts or party favors. Marier also pickles just about every vegetable under the sun and his six siblings squabble over the jars at Christmas. Marier’s daughter, Jessica, who lives in California, eagerly anticipates her dad’s visits and the pints of canned goods he carefully packs in his suitcase.

Hot peppers have been an acquired taste for Marier, 56, who’s worked at the mill since 1969. He especially enjoys the split-second delay before the burn.

Marier recalled a particular variety called Peruvian White habaneros. While chopping the pepper he inhaled it through his nose. “It made my teeth hurt. That was cool. That never happened before.”

He holds extra-kick salsa sampling for friends and hot pepper tasting parties. “We end the evening with the world’s hottest. I remember one guy we burned out hours earlier who agreed to try a piece of pepper the size of a tiny dot. He thought he was going to die.

“I’ve had people eat peppers so hot part of their face and throat temporarily goes numb. It adds to the excitement.”

Dairy products help soothe the burn; something about the casein in milk and ice cream that helps wash away the fat-soluble capsaicin. Water will not stop the burning and beer, a traditional remedy, provides little relief.

“You’ve got to know what you can handle,” Marier said.

He plans to hold a first-annual pepper tasting from 9 to 1 p.m. Sept. 18 at the mill to get people to try different flavors. The varieties will be sweet. Hot peppers are by request only. “Liability would be a concern,” Marier said.

Some of his exotic peppers, which have names like Cobra, Black Pearl, Shischtou, Lemon Drop, Rat Turd, Bird’s Eye and Chinese Five Color, were sold at the mill this year. Marier hopes to offer more exotics in the future, along with the regular bell pepper plants. His garden holds over 200 plants and 90 varieties of peppers.

“There’s hardly a pepper I haven’t tried over the years,” he said. “I guess I’m addicted to peppers.”

