

Pepper People

STEVE MARIER

Jim Perry packs a peck of peppers into his small St. Paul garden—12 varieties, 32 plants in 40 square feet in 2016.

Steve Marier grows more than 650 plants each year for his own use, in many gardens and in pots lining his long, sunny driveway in Hugo, Minn. Steve has also become “The Source” for pepper lovers in Minnesota and beyond, selling thousands of pepper plants from his greenhouse and giving talks on growing and eating peppers.

If you are a lover of peppers—especially the hot ones—Jim and Steve have a lot to share.

The Pepper ‘Source’

Steve is general manager at the Hugo Feed Mill and part of the third generation of his family to work there. He started growing peppers because he likes how ornamental they are. He also enjoys their flavor and the challenge of cooking and getting his friends to eat extra-hot ones.

His quest for unusual pepper varieties is simple but dogged. When he sees, hears about or finds new varieties, he tracks down the source and gets the seeds. He’ll grow a few plants, and if they work out, he grows and sells more.

One example is the Brazilian Star Fish (a pepper Jim grows). Steve started with one plant, collected the seeds, and eventually offered 18 of them for sale. They sold out in one week.

Steve’s friendly nature has nurtured his contacts around the world, and he trades seeds with other enthusiasts. His current catalog includes more than 375 varieties, each described in mouth-watering, sometimes mouth-searing, detail. He also gives each of the plants in his greenhouse a color-coded tag. “White-

tagged peppers are sweet,” he says. “Yellow-tagged ones are mild. Orange tags are hot.”

Steve doesn’t worry too much about the varieties crossing. Some are simply “modified.” He nets ones that he doesn’t want to cross and spaces them 4 to 5 feet apart. If he really wants to save the variety and avoid cross-pollination, he shares plants with friends for growing. He has developed some of his own varieties that stay true, under the name FM for Feed Mill. Among them are FM’s Hot Lemon, a lemon yellow hot pepper, and FM’s Gnarly Bhut Jolokia, a large, cream-colored ghost pepper.

The Pepper Planter

Jim’s work as a professor of water resources at the University of Minnesota has taken him around the globe, and he has sampled culinary peppers of all types. He’s been growing peppers in his home garden for 40 years. Still, when he heard about Steve from a neighbor who attended one of Steve’s talks, Jim knew he wanted to learn more. He drove the 30 minutes north to Hugo to talk peppers in person and he left with the 12-page list of pepper varieties that Steve sells as plants each spring. From the hot Aji Amarillo to the mild Zoltan’s Paprika, Jim read every description.

Jim laid out his current garden about 10 years ago, beginning with a square-foot-garden plan with the soil blend recommended by author Mel Bartholomew: one-third coarse vermiculite, one-third peat moss or coconut coir, and one-third blended compost. “I mulch with 3 inches of shredded cypress each year,” Jim says. “The following spring, I dig that into the soil.”

With a small garden, Jim says every



Black Pearl pepper



Numex Easter

Pepper purveyor and partisan pack their gardens full of peppers. By Nancy Leasman

year he faces a quandary about whether to plant fewer plants and give them a better chance of producing, or pack them in and see what happens. In 2016, Jim inter-planted Brazilian Star Fish with Tiburon poblanos at 18-inch intervals in an

8-foot-by-1-foot bed. The Star Fish were given a trellis because they tend to vine; they grew to 8 feet tall. The poblanos were shorter and yielded only a few 10-inch-by-2-inch flat peppers on the side of the plant that faced the sun. They prefer a



Golden Cayenne



Tiburon poblanos



A portion of Steve Marier's pepper gardens in Hugo, Minn.

How Jim Picks His Peppers

Faced with hundreds of options, Jim used his researcher's sensibility to choose which peppers he would grow. Here's his method and his final list.

Based on the descriptions in Steve's list, Jim says he "went through the list and rated everything 0-3 for 'desirability for my garden.' Then I put each one rated at least 1 into a spreadsheet, ignoring the 0s."

He then searched the Internet for information on days to maturity, diseases, height and more about each of the remaining peppers. "Then I re-ranked based on the new information," he says. "Then I mapped the most desired into their desired location in the tiny garden space I have. I had a wonderful time!"

Here's what Jim planted:

- **Filius Blue** Hot, compact, ornamental. Steve recommends it for containers or landscaping.
- **Numex Easter** Hot and compact, this 2014 All-America Selections winner grows fruit in five pastel colors.
- **Tiburon Poblano** A dark green hot pepper recommended for stuffing.
- **Uchu** The plant has variegated foliage and its chilies mature in cream, yellow, orange and red.
- **Aleppo** A sharp, sweet chile from Syria with a fruity flavor. When dried, it makes a popular seasoning.
- **Black Pearl** Steve considers this ornamental pepper with black fruit a must-have.
- **Golden Cayenne** It's gold and hotter than a red cayenne.
- **Pimenta Barro do Robiero.** Fruits of this hot, prolific pepper range from cream to coral to red.
- **Purple Flash Ornamental** Ebony fruit and violet foliage with flashes of white. Recommended for containers.
- **Purple Glow in the Dark** A hot pepper with fluorescent leaves and purple fruit.
- **Brazilian Star Fish** A tall, mild pepper with beautiful pods.
- **Blue Mystery** This unidentified hot pepper has blue flowers and fruit with a hint of sweetness.

—N.L.



Brazilian Star Fish pepper plant in Jim's garden.

JIM PERRY

long growing season and Jim found many immature ones toward the back when the growing season ended. The Brazilian Star Fish were the biggest surprise for Jim. He picked them throughout the growing season and still harvested about 2 gallons of them at season's end.

Growing Peppers

Peppers grown from seed need to be started indoors in Minnesota, though when to plant them depends on germination times. Some peppers take four weeks to sprout from seed while others pop up relatively quickly. Generally, peppers should be started indoors under lights in mid-March to grow to a good size for planting in the garden. Starts can be planted as late as mid-June, but if varieties take longer to mature (some take more than 100 days), late May is a better choice if the soil is warm. "Peppers don't like to be chilled," says Steve.

For his container peppers and those in the ground, Steve fertilizes when he puts the plants in and then one more time during the growing season. Steve has found that peppers can grow in just about any soil but he recommends testing the soil and aiming for a neutral pH of 7. Most of all, peppers need a

sunny location, Steve says. Jim waters his peppers as necessary while Steve set up a drip irrigation system for some of his. He spaces the plants 18 inches apart and positions a drip hole at each of the plants. For those in pots, he uses a wand to individually water the plants.

Both men say choosing which pepper is their favorite depends on how it's going to be used. Steve makes gallons of salsa every year while Jim is more inclined to make salsa fresca, one batch at a time. Poblano are favorites for stuffing. Dried peppers can be crushed and used in many ways. Steve has 365 vials of pepper powder on his dining table; one for each day of the year, though he will soon add more.

Do men have a greater affinity for hot peppers than women do? Steve thinks that could be true, especially for the super-hot ones. Jim says he knows many women who like the heat of peppers. While the jury may be out on that, one thing is for sure: Jim will definitely drive to Hugo for next year's pepper plants. "Steve's are the best I have ever encountered," he says. **dg**

Nancy Leasman gardens and writes in Long Prairie.



STEVE MARIER

Many of Steve's peppers grow in pots on his driveway.



JERRY HELCET

Steve Marier hosts a pepper tasting.

JIM PERRY



So many peppers! (Left) A portion of Jim's harvest of peppers; (right) Steve's collection of more than 300 pepper powders

STEVE MARIER

